FLOWERS FOR THE LIVING

A startling, unconventional story of the Hollywood few people know. It is a story of the bitterness and frustration surrounding those former stars who never quite reached the top, and are now fading quickly into the limbo of the forgotten.

Alfred Gary and Anna Hall were two such people. A short time ago their names were emblazoned in bright lights on theatre marquees all over the country. Now, they were penniless, lost in obscurity, facing the dark chasms of hopeless despair. For them there was no future, and the present was a matter of bare sustenance.

Charles Ray, who as actor and author has known Hollywood intimately for many years, has told a fascinating and dramatic story of Anna's and Alfred's courageous struggle in the face of overwhelming odds.

Flowers for the Living

by

CHARLES RAY

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TO MY MOTHER AND FATHER

"Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you."

1 Peter 4:12

CHAPTER I

THE GREEKS had a word for it. The Romans called it *cottabus.* A gin bottle crashed to the cement court of Hotel La Pajaro, resounding in loud explosion.

"Hotcha! Look out below!" came a belated cry from the top floor.

"You screwy bunch!" a protesting voice responded from a second-story window. "How do you get that way?"

"On gin, you ol' buzzard!"

Sporadic laughter rang out rich and full. Shrieks, like Indian war-whoops, were mixed with soprano tones, implying that squaws were also wild, and the warpath slippery.

"A lily to you!" was brayed into the court.

After the slow count of three another "empty" exploded below. Its thunderous noise was followed by shrapnel-like fragments of glass playing a tattoo of billiards against brick walls. The odd echo funneled up the narrow well to meet feminine laugh-

ter and banalities in nasal-twanged inelegance.

A fourth-story window was heard to raise, and a young actor looked up to ascertain from which floor the gang were tossing the bottles. Not that he cared. It was merely something that would occupy his mind while waiting for a vitally important telephone call.

A weak smile faded over his face.

Alfred Garey's mental condition was such that it made him less miserable to know that someone was able to laugh. They always laughed on that top floor, he recalled; and they were continually giving parties that annoyed the management. Quite absorbed, he opened his mouth to join in the infectuous hilarity, but no sound came. Sickening was the thought that there was no laugh left in him. Wearily he sank back into a chair, resenting it.

Shadows were creeping into the room.

Resting his eyes on the mirror of his dresser, he could see far out through the narrow slit of the court. The display lights of a theatre flared on. Blinking bulbs spelling: PREVIEW TONIGHT, made him wonder if it should be his fate never to be seen in another picture.

Presently he became conscious of counting the windows on the opposite court wall. His shoulders jerked in a shudder. He had promised himself not to count windows any more; the reaction was too much like being in a prison. Long hours of

waiting for a motion-picture agent's call, in hope of work, had brought on a few idiosyncrasies which were beginning to worry him.

The reverie was broken by his police dog.

Moving in between his knees, the dog translated hunger by rubbing a cold nose across his hand.

Instantly Alfred's mind hinged to and fro on an old subject. Yes, he reasoned conclusively, he must get rid of the dog tonight. It was the charitable thing to do—should have been done days before. Regardless of any arguments to the contrary, the manager was sure to evict him from the hotel in the morning—which meant the retention of his trunk and effects—then he would have no clothes if he did get work.

Reflex action brought him to his feet and he started pacing the floor.

The police dog followed the meaningless ambulation, wondering why his master indulged in the useless snapping of fingers which used to mean fun and a romp. Receiving nothing but bumps on the turns, the dog retreated to the bathroom rug.

Once, in passing the dresser, Alfred Garey was compelled to stop and scrutinize his changed appearance. The mirror informed him clearly that his dark hair was sadly in need of cutting, which worried him quite as much as the strained expression about the mouth. A glassy cast over his brown eyes did not enhance handsome features, but gave

the melancholy appearance of the oppressed who cannot fight back.

With a dejected grunt, he flung himself across his bed, cursing the day he left the Broadway stage for Hollywood.

The telephone bell rang life into him.

"Sorry, Mr. Garey," the operator apologized, "but are you one who is complaining about the disturbance in the court?"

"Oh, no, no, Helen. That gang never bothers me. I think it's swell if anyone can get a laugh these days. Wonder why they don't invite a fellow up?"

"Believe it or not, we've had several complaints. I was off the board for just a few seconds, and everything began to ring."

"No; I have other things to complain about. What time is it, for instance?"

" 'Smatter—did you break your watch? Or has your 'Uncle' got it?"

"You wouldn't kid a pal, Helen. Come on, give, what's the hour?"

"Well—when you hear the gong, and the pleasant voice, it'll be just seven-six P. M., Thursday, Western-quitting time and—I'm tired!"

"Poor kid! Sorry I can't take over your board for you. I don't seem to have anything to do but wait. So I'm in if a Mr. Kahn calls."

He lowered his voice.

"Helen—are you alone?"

"Yeah—are you propositioning me?"

"Sure. Listen, can you see the old pigeonhole at the desk? Do you see a blue house-envelope that seems to scream for payment in my box?"

"Yeah—want it sent up?"

"Don't be funny!" he replied with a forced laugh, and hung up.

Baffling and elusive was the evidence of hope. Again he sank to the bed and let loose a tirade against Hollywood. Cursed the people, the motion-picture business, theatrical agents, and the ill-luck that had followed him; cursed his own miserly brother-in-law for ignoring his need; the ignominy of failure, and poverty's disgraceful garret.

The telephone bell vibrated happiness into the room.

While reaching for the receiver, he forgave himself for all the vicious thoughts he had entertained about anyone.

"Hap Kahn's office calling Alfred Garey," came the voice of a secretary over the wire.

"Right!" Alfred replied with cheerful inflection.

Then he heard the agent's raspy tones ring out loud, rough, and clear in meaning.

"Guess I must be a helluva agent, Alfred?"

"How come, Hap?" the actor managed weakly.

" 'Cause why? 'Cause I can't seem tuh sell yuh."

Alfred's heart skipped a beat.

"I always thought that I was a good flesh-peddler," the agent hurried on. "Good as any in the business. But, so help me, I can't seem to bull 'em into takin' a chanct on yuh—even when I point tuh th' work yuh already did."

During the awful pause which followed, the actor could hear a match strike, and mentally see Hap take two needed puffs from a cigarette before continuing.

"Now, Alfred, I know they're all screwy, an' all that: but what'm—I—goin'—tuh—do? I know your ability—so do they—it ain't that."

The actor gasped, stuttered and finally got under way.

"Well, Hap, what did they say about that part out at Universal? I got to know, Hap—what did they say at the 'U'?"

"Same ol' gag—they want somebody wit' a name in th' part."

Alfred winced. His fingers grew numb on the receiver. A lightning weakness forced him to change position and he propped himself with a pillow on the bed.

"But—but, Hap," he pleaded, "there were two parts in that picture. How about the second?"

"List'n, Alfred—I can't tell 'em their business! All a agent can do is tuh try. Don't get me wrong either. I know how far I can go before I get thrown off a 'lot'."

"Yes, but . . . I wonder . . . It seems to me that . . . "

"Now there ain't nothin' wrong wit' your pan. Your photography is swell—swell as Montgomery's—even look somethin' like 'im . . . Shut up!" he yelled, then lowered his voice in explanation. "It's this wild office staff of mine, Alfred. They're hungry—an' I won't let 'em go to dinner 'til I go . . . Now I was thinkin', Alfred, that maybe I don't sell yuh properly—see? So I was gointa sugges' that if you wanta try some other agent, why it's oak wit' me."

There was a pause.

"Why . . . Well, Hap, I don't see . . . If that's it, then how could any other agent do any better?"

"I ain't sayin' they could. I'm only sayin' maybe." In a comical undertone, he kidded: "Try a agent who's a relative of one of the producers."

Loud and jeering laughter came over the wire into the actor's ear.

"Shut up, you lousy mugs!" Hap rebuked his staff. "Alfred, don't take that to heart. I jus' said it fur a laugh. Yuh gotta get a laugh in this silly business oncet in a while or you'll go nuts—even a agent will."

While his eyes shifted nervously about the room Alfred listened to tantalizing, ominous tones that were pronouncing a sentence of doom upon him.

"So that's her, Alf," Hap said as if concluding.

"That's how she stands. You oughta really thank me fur tellin' yuh the low-down, an' sayin' that another agent might do the trick fur yuh. That happens often enough. But if yuh really want my advice: what yuh need is a play, back on Broadway. Then you'd have 'em runnin' after yuh—see? Now that's my advice—and I think it's *swell* advice, Alfred. 'Cause unless yuh go East, I don't see much hope."

Pride forced the actor to say: "Thanks for the tip," but there was no strength of tone in his statement.

"Good-luck, kit!" the agent's far-away voice concluded.

Numbly Alfred rested the telephone on the night-table, expelling the heaviest sigh of his entire life. He leaned heavily against the head board of the bed, felt his body sag and slip to the pillow while his head whirled with vertigo. The room felt stuffy, the air narcotic, convincing him that he must be experiencing some fatigue which comes just before death. In trying to move, his weary arm slid from the edge of the bed. The police dog moved over to it and licked his hand. In that instant Alfred Garey made a decision.

Across the brilliantly lighted lobby of the Cameo Theatre a distracted girl hurried toward the street. Her lovely golden hair was disheveled and her sobs

were muffled by a handkerchief pressed against quivering lips.

"Anna Hall! Collect yourself!" Edna Allar hurried to catch up with her. "It's not as bad as you think!"

"It is!" the emotional girl insisted. "That means I'm all washed up!"

Edna placed a consoling arm about her friend. "Listen, Anna," she pleaded. "The picture will be okay when they put some of your scenes back. That's what a preview is for. You've seen such things happen before."

Anna Hall stood against the theatre wall as if the end of life had come. Cosmetic ran in black streams over a fair face, and her pale-blue eyes, which sometimes had a violet hue, suddenly went tightly shut under the sting of the biting mascara.

"Here, follow me," Edna insisted. "I must get you out of this lobby. Lock arms with me. Take this—it's a fresh handkerchief."

A collection of nondescript bystanders assembled themselves at the corner of the building to watch the retreating figures of the two beautiful girls who contrasted so exceptionally in complexion.

There was another comparison which the loiterers could not know. Aside from Edna Allar's sun-tan, which made her appear strikingly Spanish, she was a sturdier type—far better equipped to endure the fires of worldly torment than Anna

Hall, whose pale complexion, and present weakness, gave the curious bystanders the impression of a younger sister, groping blindly, like one of the famous "Two Orphans"—yet each girl approached the age of twenty-one.

Arm about her friend, Edna turned into the parking station and gave a hurry-up signal to the attendant, pointing to her car.

"Don't stumble, Anna. Can you see at all?"

"Hardly."

"We'll go to my house—and have a drink, if I can possibly find one."

"I don't want a drink!" the blind girl sobbed and, in an unguarded moment, added: "I want to die—and I mean it."

"Don't talk that way! Anna, you've got to break this spell. Now make an effort! This isn't like you."

"I know it isn't—wasn't," Anna corrected. "But that's why I'm telling you that it's the end."

"Stop that crazy chatter! Get into the fliv, if you can see. If you can't see, why feel, while I pay the man."

The snail-like attendant retired to the headlights to compare the parking stubs.

"Hey! Don't worry about tickets," Edna shouted, starting the motor. "Nobody would steal this car."

The attendant's jaw dropped on hearing the engine, which truly resembled a concrete mixer. He moved alongside with mechanical knowledge, suggesting:

"Lady, you oughta have your 'cam' looked into."

Edna rolled the car into the street. When settled in traffic, she began advice of her own.

Anna protested weakly.

"I'm not trying to Pollyanna you, Anna."

"You certainly are. How can you say that everything will turn out all right? How can one hope for a career in pictures without enough footage on the screen to prove one's worth?"

"They'll show the picture again and again as the editing goes on. Plenty of stuff that they've chopped out will go back in."

"But this isn't the first time it's happened. My roles have been growing less and less in importance. There's a reason—a grudge on someone's part. It's just . . . "

Anna left the sentence hanging in mid-air, regretting that the speculation had slipped out.

"Don't be sil!" Edna kidded. "They don't employ people to demote them. Don't give me that funny business!"

"It's been done," Anna defended.

"Phooey! That's the ol' baloney—pronounced *Ham* in Hollywood."

Unconsciously harsh, Edna's statements caused

a silence which was broken only by the rattle of the ancient car.

"You just don't know all the facts," Anna ventured at length.

"What facts?"

"The truth is, they didn't take up my option, and all my money went on clothes."

"Oh-ho!"

"This was the last picture I made. Haven't worked since, and . . . "

Getting tangled in explanations which she did not mean to reveal, Anna stopped abruptly and sat hating herself, picking at the particles of mascara about her eyes.

"You can come and live with me a while," Edna outlined.

"Why, you haven't room. You have your mother, and . . . " Her voice died away into chokes which she tried to stifle with the knot of her handkerchief.

"Go to it, baby!" Edna blurted out. "Once a woman gets the weeps, she might as well not try to check it." Hopefully, she chided: "Too bad you haven't got that 'big scene' to play now. Anyhow, get it all over with before we get to my house. I don't want mother to know that you're in the dumps about work. She might start asking questions and get me down."

"I'm sorry."

"Say!" Edna exclaimed inspirationally, "I'll get Eddie O'Donnel to help. I'll get him to shoot out some publicity on you. Might bring results. He's been doing it for me lately—he's a swell fellow. You know, in this business, you've got to have publicity, and you've got to have clothes."

While the car jogged along, Edna's thoughts shifted briefly to Eddie O'Donnel personally, hoping that he was not drinking too much. Otherwise, her regard for him had commenced to show signs of healthy growth.

"Sure I will," Edna continued as if she had been talking continually. "I'll see Eddie tomorrow about publicity; and you can pay him later, when you get set."

"Nice of you, Edna. However, I'm sure I won't need it."

Puzzled by the strange tones her friend used, Edna swung the car around a corner with surprising violence and rolled up in front of a quaint bungalow court. The motor ceased after a low, weak *plah.*

"Plah!" Edna mocked to be cheerful, and alighted to the curb in a devotional attitude. "Bounce out, Anna. Can you see any better?"

"Well enough to get to your bath, I presume."

"Poor kid! Out you come, then. I'll put the fliv away later—if I think of it. Hope someone steals it before next Saturday. After that date

the insurance is up—and it'll be my loss."

The girls cut across a bit of lawn and circled a picturesque fountain to the second bungalow.

"Mother's not at home," Edna said in relief. "I can tell by the light in the hall. So you can cloud up and burst all over again if you want to. Sorry I mentioned your weeps; but I don't want mother to think that work is scarce. When she comes in, just let her think that you've been crying over—anything but conditions. Say headache, or heartache, or—bellyache," she emphasized to be humorous, quite unconscious of its truth.

The sound of Edna's key in the lock started tiny barks of welcome from within. When the door swung, a pert Pomeranian, wearing a pale-tan ribbon about a thickly-ruffed neck of orange fur, indulged in acrobatic feats of good cheer. Edna stooped to acknowledge the gentlemanly ecstasies; but Anna snatched the dog to her bosom, expending her pent-up emotion more freely than the canine could endure. It wiggled its protest and jumped to the floor.

"Edna," Anna gasped funereally, "I want you to promise me one thing: If anything should happen to me, I want you to find a home for my little Pekingese puppy."

"Stop it, Anna! You're unfair. In another minute you'll be getting me started—and I can't take it. Now go bathe your eyes while I try to find

that drink. I've talked so much about it that I'm afraid to look for fear there isn't any—and won't that be hell?"

Shortly, Anna emerged from the bath no happier, but somewhat refreshed.

"Hoo-hoo!" She assumed a jolly tone for Edna's benefit. "Bet yuh ain't got no licker!"

Edna replied through the kitchen screen.

"I'm out here in the driveway, Anna, giving the hound a little perambulation. Run, run!" she shouted and scooted the dog across the kitchen linoleum. "Ah-ah!" she judged on viewing Anna's countenance. "You see what you get for crying? Your eyes look like two radishes in a white bowl. Well, they'll clear up pronto. Now for that liquid business!"

Hurrying to built-in cupboards, she opened door after door with unhappy groans.

"I told you you didn't have no liquor!"

With a clowning air, Edna closed her eyes hopefully, opened the last cupboard, and her eyes, then shouted: "Eureka!" as she grabbed the neck of a dark-brown bottle.

After their third drink, Edna's mother arrived, entering the kitchen to investigate the giggling. She sat for a while, and though she did not indulge in the stimulant, she smiled and laughed as though she had, as mothers often do to help perpetuate a happy mood.

She was a lovely, stately woman, with traces of a handsome girlhood. Gray hair crowned a pleasant face with glory, and her whole make-up resembled some miniature painting one often sees in the drawing-room of homes where opulence has remained wedded to lineage.

After her departure, Anna missed the understanding presence.

"Gee, Edna, I wish I had a mother like her. I've got no one to lean on—even a little bit."

On a very empty stomach, the liquor was chemicalizing, distilling into something potent, with a valence of morbidity.

"You're so lucky," she twitted on.

Self-pity, Edna silently analyzed.

"Now, Anna! Are you going to start all over again—after killing my hooch?"

"I didn't!" she defended, shaking the bottle.

"You're such a beautiful girl," Edna stated after studying her a few moments, "and should be in the money. How do you figure?"

"Freak of fate, I suppose. I'm sure fate's got me. That happens now and then in the best of studios. Look at the mob who are having a tough time now. Nobody ever thinks that picture people have a hard pull. There's always been so much talk about large salaries. Few ever got them. And . . . "

"And fewer now!"

"That's my point. Plenty of former stars can

hardly get enough extra work now to keep going. Just how many do you think there are in this business on the ragged edge of nothing?"

The weight of her own question made her eyes grow dreamy with speculation, and her voice bitter.

"Lots of them are ready to fall over the brink," she assured. "Have fallen—are falling."

She repeated the word *falling* as if enjoying the utterance.

"Hey! Change it to *filling*."

Edna poured another drink in Anna's glass.

Not heeding, the girl rambled on, putting mystery into her tones, and finally resting a frightening gaze upon her chum.

"You know, Edna," she informed thickly, "I've often thought that if I ever commit suicide I'd do it by falling . . . "

"Anna!"

Edna sat her glass down hard on the table, to break the spell. It crashed. A wave of liquid crossed the board and glass flew to the floor.

"Stop such talk!" she screamed, shaking the morbid one by the shoulders. "What am I to do with you?"

Her black eyes snapped rebuke as she grabbed a towel, and kicked glass toward the waste basket viciously.

"I seem to be the mug that's got to stand the weight of your depression tonight. But so help

me, I'm not superhuman—an' gal, you're gettin' me down!"

Her tones were too severe. Anna rose, clutching the door casing for support.

"I'll go then," she announced thickly. "Thanks for your cheer-water which didn't cheer. But I'll remember though, when I'm in Heaven."

Unsteadily she swerved into the adjoining room.

"Anna, I'll drive you home."

"No, you won't! I need the air. Now that you've given it to me figuratively, it suggests the real article."

"Look out for that chair, Anna. Wait until I find the dog's leash and I'll walk with you to your apartment."

"Maybe I'm not going to the hotel."

While Edna was searching for the dog's leash, Anna flung the door and staggered to the sidewalk. The Pomeranian shot out off the steps to the hydrangea bush and Edna rushed to capture it.

Moving out into the darkness, Anna mumbled ambiguous statements.

"What, Anna? I can't hear—the dog's barking."

The Pomeranian had started barking belligerently, intent on attacking a police dog ten times its size. Spreading her skirts, Edna scooted the little canine up the stairs into the hallway and stood peering into the night.

"Don't be afraid, Miss Allar," a resonant voice

echoed out of the shadows. "I have my dog on leash. How are you?"

"Oh, it's Alfred Garey, isn't it?" With her mind on Anna, Edna merely made quick conversation. "My, you're strutting like a New York actor with your dog on leash."

A caustic laugh reverberated.

"I am a New York actor. Wish I were back there. I might . . . some . . . work . . . and . . . keep . . . "

As he walked on, his dying, unintelligible words found continuity in Edna's mind, then a strange intuition compelled her to raise her voice to shout complacent statements.

"Don't let anything get you down!" she concluded.

Pausing to discern what she had actually said caused her to realize the conflicting emotions which had startled her; and immediately she became cognizant of an uncanny conception which connected Alfred Garey and Anna Hall with the same frail thread of circumstances.

Ominous thoughts swam in and out of her mind. A shudder shook her body and her flesh tingled, drawing as tight as a drum. With a frightened jerk, she slammed the door, bolted it tightly and stood as one in a nightmare, too shocked to speak. Wondering if she could utter a sound forced her mouth open in an attempt; then she heard herself call:

"Mother!" in a far-sounding voice.

A gentle answer from a darkened room decreased her thumping heart.

"Mother, may I sleep with you tonight?" she modulated. "I have oodles of things to talk to you about before you fall asleep," she alibied, and went around humming while turning on numerous light switches.

While undressing, she thought gratefully: What a wonderful thing it is to be conscious of the presence of another being.

CHAPTER II

ALFRED GAREY turned a corner into a street lined with stubby palm trees, bathed yellow with infrequent street lamps. After a few paces, his police dog barked madly and jerked violently on the leash.

"What is it, Rajah? What do you see?"

The actor stooped to gain the dog's perspective. "Come on, now, calm down."

In the mottled network of shadows, he saw the figure of a girl clutching to a palm-tree trunk for support. Silencing the agitated dog, Alfred hurried to her.

"My dear girl. You're—you're ill?" he stammered. "Is there something . . . May I call a cab?"

He slid a protecting arm about her waist. As quickly the girl pushed it away, and with effort, straightened up and leaned against the tree.

Recognition caused Alfred to gasp: "Anna Hall! What is the matter?"

"It started with a bottle in Edna Allar's kitchen," she confided.

"I think I'd better go for a cab."

"No. Be all right in a few minutes. I guess I just need air. Can't see very well. You're Alfred Garey, I take it."

Nodding, he again asked to be of assistance.

"No. I'm just dizzy. Perhaps two ways, if anybody should ask you," she maintained disgustedly. "Edna insisted that I have a drink for what she thought was ailing me. I should have had food instead."

A remote portion of his mind heard. The rest of him was absorbing her beauty.

"Morbidity prevented me from asking for a sandwich. Pride maybe—self-pity—something," she concluded aridly. "Did you . . . "

For a moment or two she mumbled on incoherently, drew a shapely forearm across her brow, then rallied.

"Did you ever suffer from self-pity?" she asked with a sneer. "Well, I think I have a bad case, because all I want to do is to die."

The shocking thought of her passing seemed preposterous. With eager unbelief, he said: "You're joking!"

"I *am* not! Think it's my fate. Only I don't know why fate don't act without my having to do something about it. 'To die, to sleep'," she quoted. "Hamlet was no fool. That's what I want to do."

Her words seemed unendurably cold. The shocking thought that she had already taken some potent drug, and was ready to enter the wild embrace of another unthinkable world, caused Alfred to shoot a few pointed questions at her which were not appreciated.

"Will you please leave me," she pleaded.

"I will not!"

Analysis was inchoate in the actor's mind; but it took no great psychiatric knowledge to diagnose her case. A desire for such a consummation could only be prompted by unrequited love, or hunger. Her embarrassment suggested the latter.

When dizziness started afresh, he took her two hands in his and lifted her arms up over her head and down rhythmically like a bellows, hoping she would not object.

She permitted it freely, but kept her eyes closed.

Not wholly knowing why, he sensed elation in being able to watch her. The nightmare cruelty of life had only allowed him the privilege of knowing her professionally. She now appeared lovelier than ever. Her pink ears were as delicate as sea shells. The perfume of her hair was in his nostrils. Now and then her eyes opened to look at him over a slightly raised shoulder. Yes, his mind concluded for him, she was a gorgeous composite of the color-illustrator's art—a magazine-cover girl. To imagine her in the throes of hunger hurt.

"Curious," he mumbled unconsciously.

At length she pushed his hands away.

"Feel better?"

"Much."

He watched her carefully without seeming to.

Occasionally her thin young arms lifted exquisite hands to her brow. But to him it hardly seemed the gesture of one emerging from an illness. Her figure was poetic. With hair disarranged, as if a breeze was blowing it, she stood like a girl at the seashore—with laughing eyes, now saddened just a bit—counting ocean waves for luck, or shielding the sun's bright ray while watching a sail-boat mast dip below a brilliant, polychromatic horizon.

Breathing more normally, she watched him quite as much as he did her, and wistfully asked: "Why have you been mumbling *curious* and *strange* every few moments."

"Because," he explained quickly, not meaning to, "all you have told me, and implied, is so extraordinarily like my own series of thoughts—especially since seven o'clock this evening."

"And so you were thinking of bumping yourself off, too?"

He shuddered. "Terrible confession, isn't it?"

With a shrug of her shoulders, she consoled: "Well, the way things have been breaking, it doesn't take much imagination to know your reason." An

ironic gurgle sounded in her throat. "Two minds with but a single thought."

"My first conviction when the dog barked," he admitted freely, "was a hold-up. Imagine the disappointment any culprit would have had after searching me. And my chivalrous gesture in offering you a cab should go down in your diary."

Like new schoolmates, they stood gazing questioningly at each other. Their memory of pain was receding.

"All right now?" he asked, wondering just how long he had been gazing into her eyes.

"Yes. But isn't it a laugh to talk of dying, yet fight for air? Still, a half-way state won't suffice."

She began prodding him with questions. For needed occupation, he parted the palm leaves and looked out. Parked cars in the block above helped change the subject.

"Say," he insisted, "have a look at the party that's raging at Henry Mun's house. Swell cars; some people still have money."

Instead of following his gaze, she studied his serious countenance.

"And they say," he continued with disgust, "that Henry Mun throws low-down parties—whatever that means."

Curiosity forced Anna to relent. Absorbed, they watched elegant-looking cars unloading carefree revelers.

"We must resemble a couple of waifs," he scoffed. "Yes, Christmas-card waifs, standing in the snow outside the rich-man's house. Only our clothes are not ragged, and California is no setting for a picturesque waif."

"Don't mention clothes to me!" she threatened. "They have probably been my downfall." She expelled a sigh. "However, it's necessary that an actress be dressed—or would I be vulgar in saying: maybe I'm wrong?"

"After that pun I should say that you must be entirely recovered."

She began talking glibly; but he was hardly conscious of her words. Something had clicked inside his brain. His thoughts were riveted on the house of Henry Mun, surprising him a bit. A withered stomach had acted as an antennæ, receiving an S.O.S. message which he immediately discovered was from his own sending station. Feeling suddenly polarized with man's hospitality, he turned to his new friend with inspiration.

"How's this for an idea? What do you say to forgetting this waif business—and our pride—and crashing Henry's supper?"

Anna gasped.

"Why—why," she stuttered, "I hardly know the man. Met him quickly once. Never cared to renew the acquaintance I can assure you. I'm sure he wouldn't."

"That's nothing in our predicament. I don't know him at all, except that he's supposed to be a fairly good director in his line of stuff—shorts, you know."

"It's silly! Some bouncer would throw you out."

"I don't think so—unless they're all drunk. That might or might not be an advantage." Humorously he predicted: "It would depend upon one's horoscope. Aw, come on, forget your pride. What you need is a . . . "

"I don't want anything to drink."

"Who does? I was thinking that he's sure to have something to eat—*hors d'oeuvre*—if not an expansive spread."

"Bet you're wrong. Bet his supper is entirely liquid."

"That's foolish. There's sure to be sandwiches, or crackers and cheese, or saratoga chips and—at least pretzels."

"Pl-ease, Mr. Garey," she drawled. "How you do tantalize, like a friendly waiter. I might add that you look like a gangster, peeping through those leaves. All you need is an arsenal."

"All I need is food. I'm a weak gangster. You know, no mother, no father, no automobile, no penthouse. Shall I write you a scenario about it?"

His words were jovial for her benefit, but an inner excitement was surging through him. With one last gesture, he longed to bury convention be-

fore he himself was buried. Being an uninvited guest at a party suggested the topographical starting point. Inspirationally he turned to reveal his plan.

She moistened her lips several times.

"You've got to say something," he said with an air of freedom that infected her. "Do we muscle in on this party? Crash or no crash?"

"Crash!" she ejaculated, keyed for the onslaught. "Our last party! And not given in our honor."

"Who knows? Perhaps it is and we don't know it."

She laughed artificially. "I do feel quivery when I think of it."

"Don't think. That Henry or his drunken friends just have the good taste not to kick us out until we get a sandwich in our hands is all I ask. Now I've got to drop the dog off."

"Lord!" Her hand ran over her heart. "For a moment I thought you said 'bump him off.' I think the subject has absorbed me."

"Now how could you think that of me?"

"Well, people do chloroform dogs."

"Skip it," he said calmly. "I haven't money to buy chloroform for myself. I'm taking the dog over to my miserly brother-in-law."

"Then you have relatives. Don't they feel inclined toward helping you?"

"I'll say not! The brother-in-law that *was* has

married again—after my sister's death. I 'phoned him this evening that I was extending a gift. Can you imagine: he wants the dog but doesn't desire to see me? He's been that way ever since I acquired Rajah. He acts as people do if one happens to purchase something they claim to have been considering."

Affectionately he rubbed the dog with his knee, receiving no playful response.

"He's pretty hungry, so I'll be doing him a swell favor if I hurry along. Suppose you can make it—down a block and around the second corner?"

"Certainly. The thought of dining has revived me. I feel like a baby sighting its bottle."

They moved out and down the sidewalk, in friendly silence for a time.

"I'm afraid I feel a little giddy," Anna said finally. "I remind myself of that little minister in the play: *Outward Bound*. Remember—he wanted to say damn and hell and what-not all his life? On discovering himself actually dead, he went about daring the things which were not permitted in his station while on earth."

"Swell part," Alfred returned absently. "I played it in stock."

"Swell play. Well, that's how it is with me." She released a hollow laugh. "Whether I've won or not, I've passed the checkered flag—the race is over.

The struggle is ended. The restraint is gone. Everything's finished."

"Don't think I don't understand you," he said with more interest. "Being an analyst makes your case more painful. Thinkers suffer most, don't you think? They do if they don't rise high enough—and few do. Only the thoughtless are happy. I've found that pondering is quite a hell. I'm sure there's a harmonious secret to life, but I haven't found it. What do you think?"

"I'm trying not to think any more. Unless it's about something pleasant, or humorous."

"Thata girl! Hell with it! Perhaps we'll get some laughs before the night's over, who knows? However, the decision I made this evening gave me release. I have a sense of freedom I have never felt before. How about you?"

There was a pause while she whipped her mind to drown the admission.

"Still," she voiced carefully, "it's rather like knowing what you're going to get for Christmas, isn't it?"

They exchanged glances and talked quickly of other things.

"And here's the dog's new home," Alfred announced derisively.

He placed his hand on a white picket gate set in a cypress hedge, and reached for a small hanging bell which he silenced with his handkerchief.

"I'll only be a few moments," he whispered, flipped the latch and entered. "Must see if *the miser* put the food out which he promised, in order not to see me. Mind being alone?"

"No," she answered firmly, "I'm not afraid of anything on earth." And at the moment, she meant it.

She watched Alfred fade into the shadows across a well-cut lawn, then transferred her gaze to the bounding dog, noticing its keen scent on the trail of food. After circling the yard twice, it stopped under a flower-covered arbor. A gulping sound indicated that dinner was served.

Left alone, Anna's thoughts went immediately to death, as they had done repeatedly in the last few weeks. Her eyes lifted to watch a rising moon place a diadem of silver on a stately oak-tree's head.

"You're dead!" she grunted hatefully at the moon; "and I soon will be."

The alarming notion that she might be mentally unbalanced gave her a cold, reactionary chill. Irritably she scanned the garden, ready to cry out for Alfred's return. Then, in the faint light under the arbor, she saw the figure of a man kneeling, as if adjusting the dog's collar. Immediately an awful welling-up seemed to press her heart aside. Tears flooded her eyes. "Oh, poverty of understanding", she remembered in rebuke. Alfred wasn't fixing

its collar. He was hugging the dog, indulging in a last farewell.

She stood quietly until she heard Alfred's footfalls on the gravel.

The actor moved quietly through the gate, cleared his throat and mumbled a feeble apology.

"And what a liar you are," Anna whispered huskily, wiping her eyes.

She took his arm.

"I may need a little balancing, Alfred—if it isn't a case of the weak leading the weak."

They walked away rapidly.

Anna meant to talk of pleasant things, but her tongue played tricks.

"These relatives," she inquired, "are they financially independent?"

"Sure! That dirty bum got my sister's money, and married again. Aw, he's a worthless scamp! He's got a job inspecting meat; and the only thing he knows about meat is where to place the indelible stamp. Anyhow, the dog's got a swell home; and I can die in peace whenever I get the courage."

The statement caused a gloomy silence until they reached the Mun house.

Alfred led Anna up to a low hedge surrounding the grounds. They eyed the estate like youngsters looking for what they contend to be a lost baseball yet conscious only of an apple tree.

From the house, set well back of an expansive

lawn, they heard the scuffle of the gay party, sounding pregnant from bellies full of food and drink. Each, in his own heart, hoped that it was not entirely from drink.

"Since our host isn't expecting us," Alfred ventured, "we can enter whenever we get the nerve."

"Look!" Anna whispered and pointed.

In the shadows near the house, a man held the leaning form of a girl, walking her to and fro.

"She looks like you, Anna," Alfred chuckled; "he's giving her the air."

Anna prodded him with her elbow. "Now is that nice?"

"How can I tell?" he answered flippantly. "Maybe she's having a swell, dizzy time. We're in our right minds, and we're not happy."

"He's taking her up the steps now."

"Ah, but she doesn't qualify; she still wobbles."

They watched a good Samaritan gather the feminine pillow in his arms while he struggled to ring the bell. On getting no speedy response, he banged violently on the wall.

"Rough guy!" Alfred snickered. "Perhaps they've been thrown out for keeps. I'll lay you a bet . . . "

The door opened a few inches, then swung to welcome the pair. Rich, sensual laughter floated out over the garden, fading with its closing.

"See, Anna! Act like a riveter. That's how to get in. . . . Well, do we try it?" he asked with a "why not?" answer in his tone, then humored wryly; "You see, outside you're just a waif, while inside you might find yourself a wafer."

"What a pun—and in my condition! It's a bun I need."

"I told you that I felt free. And I will laugh, even at my own puns. From now on I'm the up-and-up fellow."

"It's oak by me. But listen, I've simply got to sneak into one of these parked cars and use the dome light for a glimpse at my face. I must look ghastly. Maybe powder won't do any good."

Alfred bowed respectfully, like an English starter, and stepped to the curb.

"Right, Madame!"

With a clowning air, he opened the door of a coupe, leaned over to the steering wheel and read the license card.

"Owned and operated by Miss Evelyn Hent," he announced.

"Slam that door!" Anna hissed.

Obeying, he looked up and down the street like a thief.

"What's the matter, Anna?"

"I could never get into that girl's car. Let's try one over there where it's less conspicuous."

They skipped across the street like surreptitious

children on Hallowe'en, and marched down a long lane of parked cars.

"Have a heart, Anna! Pick one sometime."

Alfred pointed an accusing finger at a luxurious sedan.

"I must know who owns it," Anna insisted. "Do your stuff."

A moment later, he raised up with woeful information.

"No go, Anna. It's George Stinzel' car."

Maliciously she returned: "I say yes! Why, the dirty eel owes me money. In we go!"

Impudently they mounted to the cushioned tonneau, showing the utmost disrespect for the independent motion-picture producer whom no one cared for socially, yet feared professionally.

Alfred leaned back like a capitalist.

"Tell me, little girl," he drawled, "what has George Stinzel ever done to you? Has he been a bad boy?"

"The louse, I should call him, owes me back salary for a picture I did way last June. A couple of days' retakes to be specific. It's a long story. Let's not have any long stories. Let's enjoy the car and call it a deal."

"Right! " Alfred agreed, and slipped into a reverie. "I wonder if you feel the way I do. Isn't it a wonderful feeling one acquires when . . . I wonder if I can explain just how I feel."

"Perhaps you feel like holding my mirror."

He saw her struggling with a mascara-stained handkerchief no larger than the palm of her hand. With the gesture of a courtier, he drew his from his breast pocket.

Her eyes shot past the mirror he held, in gratitude.

"Oh!" she accused. "*Monsieur* is in the *boudoir!*"

"Don't ask me for a cigarette, Anna, but here's an old lighter that still works."

He held it by the mirror; and the augmented light reflected weird shadows upon the rear curtain. Again she appeared to him as a poetic figure. Memory recalled a painting by Innes—a girl holding a candle, gazing down an old-fashioned wishing well at midnight.

"My—my!" Anna lamented. "Do I need the war-paint! I look like Polly Moran or Zasu Pitts when they get mad. And those are girls," she eulogized, "who didn't have a rosy time all their careers."

"Neither did Garbo, for that matter. Nor Warner Baxter. How about Marie Dressler? Ann Harding? Plenty in the business who have had a tough pull before success finally bowed. When the break finally arrives, it must give one heart attack, eh? I guess that's something we'll miss, Anna."

"Don't go serious on me."

She adjusted the mirror to her liking, allowing him to think that he was doing it.

"I thought you the boy who was going to laugh —from now on. I won't mind if you do, you know."

"Here's something quite strange, Anna," he began blithely enough. "I always wanted to know you—tremendously, I mean. Why was it that I couldn't have known you when I wanted to—when I was crazy to—instead of meeting you now? Odd, eh?"

"Why odd?" she answered flippantly. "I don't promise to answer any riddles; and nothing can make me serious."

"That's my point! It proves something."

She laughed mockingly.

"Would you like to know what it proves?" she asked without waiting. "It proves the truth concerning the only quotation I could recall tonight while wracking my brain for one about the beauty of the moon. And what was the philosophic quotation, says you? Why, 'Lord, what fools these mortals be!' says me."

"Aw, be serious for one minute, Anna. Listen to this?"

While lining her lips, she ridiculed: "I bed id's go-idn tuh pe . . . " Relaxing, she finished intelligibly: " . . . great philosophy when you get it all out."

"Yes, it is! Because it proves something."

"Boo!" she groaned. "Boy, you're gettin' me down, as they say in wrestling. Say, what is all this?"

"Seriously, Anna. This is my point: When one gets to the extremity of existence, there's some new bond, so to speak, between man and woman."

"I'm off duty; I'm not interested."

"And that's my point. That's the way I feel. And I feel that way because of a change. A change was caused by conditions. That proves that occasionally something happens to out-sex sex."

"Let's see?" she said banteringly. "Something that out-sexes sex—ah! Mae West!"

"Aw, why do you let me ramble on and . . . "

"Oh, cease! I was merely attempting to furnish some of the laughs we both desired. I understand you perfectly. Certainly, most any necessity might rob one of sentiment. Whether it's true or not, let's get on our way. Let's go and out-sandwich the sandwiches."

Victoriously he thrust: "And there's further proof! Food comes into the human mind before any other desire."

A harsh rap on the car window ended the weighty discourse.

A skinny, unshaven, beetle-browed private policeman stuck his face against the glass with searching authority.

"Mr. Mun's orders," he proclaimed. "There's to be no foolin' in the parked cars!"

Anna guffawed, caught her sides, and went into paroxysms of laughter.

The policeman's avaricious eyes told him that there would be no tip forthcoming. With specious carelessness, he sauntered down the long lane of cars, flashing his battery lamp, in search of erotic cash customers.

"Oh!" Anna moaned. "I've never heard anything so funny. Too bad I'm not going to have grandchildren. I'd save this Hollywood saga for them. You know—the night grandma got caught in the tonneau! Alfred—you're not at all chivalrous—we've been insulted by a Knight of the Lantern!"

"That also proves something."

"Don't! Not after that. Well, I'm all ready to go now. Ready for the last round-up."

Alfred alighted to the pavement and turned to find her inscribing a card which she fastened to the upholstery with a hairpin. After helping her out, he flamed his cigarette lighter and leaned in the car to read it.

"No, no!" Anna protested, hanging on to his sleeve. "Alfred! You mustn't."

"Why, Anna, it's all in fun?"

"No, it isn't! I said things—terrible things I shouldn't—accusing George Stinzel of everything

on the calendar. You were terrible to peek!"

"Don't take on so, Anna. It wasn't like eavesdropping. Although I don't mind stating that in my mood I could look through anybody's keyhole, with the cold heart of a columnist."

She forgave him with a smile.

They crossed the street arm in arm. To outward appearances, they were interested in each other—inwardly they cared for nothing. Food held a temporary place of importance in their minds; otherwise, each felt the conscious sting of worldly checkmate, and the unconscious influence of annihilation.

CHAPTER III

WILLING stomachs urged them past the gate, but hesitant feet slowed their pace as they mounted the brilliantly-lighted veranda.

A shapely bracket extended from the wall with its ironcraft outraged by a hundred-watt bulb, cleverly arranged to blind callers in order to allow peep-hole scrutiny from within.

"I'm shivery," Anna whispered. "Got goose pimples. Say something for luck."

"Nuts with it! If I should say, 'Open sesame!' I might stutter."

He rang the bell commandingly. Receiving no response, he rapped loudly.

"Don't tell me that you're afraid of anything, Anna, after what you've been through."

"I never felt so free in my life." Quickly she corrected: "Mind, I didn't say *happy*, I said *free*."

"The best things in life are free."

"Don't be funny! Why do they take so long?"

"Shall I tell the butler we won't stay if there's no supper?"

The door opened no more than an inch, revealing an Oriental face crowded with frowns.

The keen narrow eyes caused Anna to gulp. But she rallied instantly with a smile. When she used it sincerely, no one on earth could withstand her angelic smile. Just now, her stomach dictated.

East met West with something more than diplomacy. Japan and America were immediate friends. The butler's tan face beamed. His head jerked in and out of his white coat like an animated totem pole, then he swung the door open wide.

Relieved, the actors stepped into a dark hallway and heard a heavy bolt secure the door behind them.

Then hell broke loose.

Six heavy revolver shots reverberated like a machine gun. A foul-looking drunk appeared from out of the shadows. With a wind-bladder, he rained lightning blows across their faces.

When her mind cleared, Anna found herself huddled in a corner with Alfred standing shaky, but protective, in front of her.

A girl with a Western six-gun bumped into the drunk with the air-bladder. Both fell to the floor in a tangled mess. Intermittently, between spasmodic laughter, they explained the meaning of it all.

"Welcome!" the man shouted.

"Initiated!" the girl cried.

A door flew open at the end of the corridor,

emitting a broad beam of light which silhouetted the figure of a man rushing toward the fracas.

Squinting through the half-light at their protector, the new-comers recognized the smiling countenance of Eddie O'Donnel.

"Hello, Alfred! Sorry, Anna," he apologized. "Those damned drunks are crazy! Say, I haven't seen either of you in a hell of a while. Where have you been keeping yourselves? Follow me to the bar," he instructed, and hurried down the hallway.

Pulling herself together, Anna whispered: "Lord! If we stay here long enough, we won't have to worry about self-destruction. It will be arranged for us."

"Right! It proves . . . "

"Stop it! That statement of yours is getting to be a gag-line."

"What's a gag-line?" Eddie asked from the end of the hall. "Who's that funny? I can stand a laugh. This place has gone morgue!"

Through the open door could be seen the outline of a bar. Hours of cigarette smoking had produced a powdered lighting like the lithograph of a terrible den.

"Did that guy hurt your mouth, Anna?" Eddie swung around the end of the bar.

"Nothing to fuss about."

"The louse is a pain in the neck. And the dame

swiped the gun outa Ted Ballans' chaps. You know, that awful Western near-actor. He came right from location with his outfit on. He thinks it's cute the way she's been actin'. He's been loadin' that gun up for her all evenin'. I'd kick 'em both clear outa here if it was my party; but I'm only tendin' bar for Henry. He's under the weather just now. . . . Oh, well, what the hell—what'll you have to drink, folks?"

With pride, he pointed to several recipes which he had written and pasted to the bar mirror.

"I sho do mix a wicked knock-outer," he assured jovially. "Take a stool and think it over. Most everybody's a little quiet just now; an' I'm the reason. I confused the folks mighta early this evenin'. So, jus' take yo' time. Sooner or later I'll get you confused. Yes, I will."

Eddie gave a characteristic birdlike nod and a wink, then turned his attention to the bar mirror while he readjusted the ivory part in the center of his red hair.

"I know what!" he exclaimed inspirationally. "Maybe you folks would like a fancy drink like this? I just concocted it. I call it: 'Calling All Cars'."

He lifted a tall glass to his lips and drank freely. Then he crossed his eyes, shook his head like a horse, ground his teeth comically; and from the depths of his diaphragm, he emitted a crescendo tone in imitation of a fire-department siren. With round eyes, he sang: "Ning!" and the show was over.

Eddie O'Donnel was a publicity man, and generally the life of any party. But his friends spoiled him. They insisted that he should have been a comedian. This compliment, at times, forced a very natural Irish wit aside to the dangerous ground of eccentricity.

"My stomach's a bit upset," Anna replied to Eddie's insistence. "And I think Alfred is on the wagon, or nearly so. Aren't you, Mr. Gag-man?"

Alfred grunted.

His mind was well occupied in searching for evidence of food. He saw a gin-soaked couple in the far corner, and another amorous pair at a table near him; but no signs of anything edible before them. On the floor, only cigarette stubs and match ends met his eyes. Along the stacked glasses on the bar, no sign of even a wounded pretzel could be seen. After exchanging a helpless glance with Anna, they both looked up at Eddie O'Donnel like white mice waiting for a crumb.

Thinking he had read their thoughts correctly, Eddie assured: "Don't worry, the gang'll be heard from soon. There's a bit of a lull now. Our host passed out, not long ago. Poor ol' Henry needed a little siesta."

He snapped his fingers.

"I know what to mix you folks. Am I clever!

A sour. That'll make your stomachs talk right back to you."

Anna lifted her eyebrows. Alfred groaned inwardly.

Without waiting for an answer, Eddie arranged his bar things to suit his task.

Anna's dropped jaw resembled a dismal caricature, but she brightened instantly. Eddie's chatter caused her whole being to change to the personification of hope.

" . . .meantime, you may want some food . . . "

Eddie was actually saying it, but stopped while he squeezed a lemon.

" . . . we got some nice trays of . . . "

His guests were forced to wait for another lemon.

" . . . stuff. Take a squint at those ol' horses douvers behind the screen in the corner."

As casually as possible, like children who imply that they do not want any cake, the two actors made their way to the huge trays of heaven-sent food.

"Ning!" Eddie sang out, prolonging it for attention.

Anna and Alfred became his audience.

With pride, Eddie raised the beverage shaker high into the air and began shaking the concoction furiously, displaying great dexterity and syncopation.

The actors gave him part of the applause he desired.

After a few chicken sandwiches, Anna felt the satire of the situation. Arching her eyebrows superciliously, she asked: "Alfred, do you find that you have to diet much?"

Alfred choked, then responded as if bored: "I was afraid that I was going to be forced into it. But I'm past that danger now."

"That's right," the publicity man chimed in. "You actors have to watch the ol' figure, don't you?"

"Much too much," Anna agreed ambiguously. "Tonight at dinner time, I thought that I would never eat again."

"You said it!" Eddie indulged in his birdlike nod. "Why eat when you can drink?" After slicing a lemon as thin as cellophane, he pointed the knife menacingly at Alfred. "And you—you mug—how do you get so lucky? If I could drink with the adorable Anna Hall, I'd say to hell with eatin'!"

"Better not let Edna Allar hear you say that," Anna chided.

"I'm in the doghouse." Eddie stabbed the knife into the chopping board, "By the way," he recalled, "Edna swore that she was goin' to a preview with you. Did she? You gotta tell, Anna."

Briefly she waited, enjoying his jealousy.

Edna Allar was making him guess far too much.

She ruled with a steady gaze and a beautiful face. And while Eddie had got past the first kiss, as he often argued mentally—with her rouge on two of his handkerchiefs to prove it—he could not, when sober, conceal his worship, nor his surprise in noting that she could care for him at all. And so, to keep his complex under control, he saw her only when he was tight, standing much abuse for it, allowing her to think him on the brink of toperism's dark abyss.

"Sure, Eddie," Anna relented, "I'll tell. We went to a picture that I thought I was in. Imagine! I think I'm all washed up on the screen."

The publicity man growled: "Say, when you're through in pictures, why—why I can't mix a good drink."

As if to prove his talent, he dropped a red cherry into each glass with a deft good-luck-to-you sort of gesture, and swung around the end of the bar, brandishing the drinks on a tray, rolling his eyes up at the bobbing lemon with the glee of a fisherman watching two corks at once. A great balancing act ended in a low salaam.

Before he could recover, the girl with the gun ran madly into the room. She bumped Eddie with a heavy impact which sent them both to the floor.

"Damn!" she cried, as the liquid ran down her bodice. "I'm ginnied two ways."

In scrambling to her feet, the gun exploded. Eddie grabbed at it; but she evaded him and ran into the adjoining room with a drunken laugh.

"Damn that dame!" Eddie barked, kicking the broken glass into a corner. "If I thought I could get 'er into it, I'd call a cab. Too bad Henry's out; he'd smack 'er."

He took a deep breath like a prizefighter, buckling his temper within him.

"Sorry folks, I'll mix you another," he modulated and retreated.

During the silence which followed, a little wall-eyed man, intent on being the comedian of the evening, took a stool leisurely to absolve himself of any part of the accident. His drunken eyes rested upon Anna.

"Do you want to hear me imitate a sea lion?"

The ridiculous inquiry brought forth laughter from the actors and a belligerent attitude from Eddie.

"Scram!" he threatened. "Beat it! Imitate a drunk goin' down that hall."

The comic's face beamed.

"I can imitate a good drunk," he announced professionally.

In sliding from the stool, he got unbalanced, receiving a premature laugh.

"Let him stay," Anna implored. To be pleasant, she said: "I like imitations."

The comic stood hopefully like a court jester.

"The blood's on your head," Eddie regretted. "He'll drive you coo-coo, Anna."

"Would you like my imitation of the sea lion or Jimmie Durante?" he ballyhooed.

A pistol shot echoed through the house.

Heavy tread was heard on the stairs. Then a tall, well-built, dark-complexioned man in red silk pajamas rushed into the barroom. Blinking his sleepy eyes, he demanded:

"Just what the goddam hell is the shootin' about? I asked plenty to have it stopped! Can't a swell host get a little sleep while mugs drink his liquor? What the hell kind of a party do they think I'm throwin'?"

Having run out of words, Henry Mun stood aggressively awaiting remarks.

"It's Ted Ballans' fault," Eddie appeased. "He came right from work with his outfit on. An' some dame I never saw before has been actin' kittenish with his gat."

"Don't sound proper," he comic moralized.

Gun shots rang out in the drawing-room. A male voice shouted: "Grab that twist an' slap her puss!"

As if obeying, Henry poised himself by the door.

The girl rushed pell-mell into the barroom. Henry grabbed her wrist and twisted it. The gun fell to the floor. He picked it up and fired it until the gun clicked empty.

"Now don't be such a smarty!" he reproached. "Go tell your lousy Western ham-actor friend not to come to my house again if he can't come in civil—civil—" he hiccupped.

"Civilian. Civilian clothes," Eddie prompted and handed Henry a drink to ease the situation.

Henry's loose smile widened, for he was a congenial drunk. Too gin-weary to argue, he handed the gun back to the girl with grunted restrictions.

A new face had commanded his attention. Ages seemed to pass while he held Anna with his gaze, like a snake charming a bird. Relief came to her by a figure passing between them, asking:

"Do you want me to imitate Jimmie Durante or the sea lion?"

"Oh, you screwy mug!" Henry roared. "Don't spoil my party with your damned imitations. Gwan home!"

Saved by the clown, Anna mustered quick conversation concerning him.

"Just who is he?" she whispered to Henry. "He looks like Jimmie Durante."

"Salvo!" Henry bellowed. "That's the trouble. The crazy loon won't let you forget it. His name happens to be Ned Rank. An' what a name! 'Cause *does he* smell!"

Professionally outraged, the comic denied the allegation pathetically.

"Okay!" Henry relented. "Now you start! Give

those parlor tricks." He moved over by the door, giving the clown space in front of Anna. "Gwan, give the Durante imitation, an' we'll see how it smells!"

Having communicated Henry's vitriolic attack upon her boy-friend's acting ability, the Western player reloaded the gun so that she might further annoy her host. Now she jumped out of the dark hall and fired close to his feet.

Henry whirled to the center of the room. With windmill arms, he massaged the many sparks out of his pajamas trousers. Enraged, he grabbed the gun from the astounded girl and fired five shots near her legs.

Amid a cloud of smoke, the girl collapsed, rolled on the floor, and gave vent to agonizing groans.

An eager mass of humanity crowded into the barroom. Then a respectful silence ensued while they watched two girls, and a man who suggested medical knowledge, carefully part her stocking away from a calf purple with deep powder burns.

Ted Ballans, in full cowpuncher regalia, pushed his hulk of six-feet four through the crowd to shake a gargoyle fist in Henry Mun's face.

"You fathead!" he bulldozed. "I oughta rub you out!"

Sobered by rapid events, Henry challenged: "When you wanta start? You're a cluck to give

a girl a gun to play with. Just like a posing ham actor!"

Henry ducked a powerful blow. After a clinch, four men parted them. A vocal battle began while each glared hatefully at the other.

"Proves you're a ham!" Henry accused. "The fem needs to be taken to a hospital and you stop to play a scene. If the girl should die we'll all be up in court. Hey, Togo!" he yelled. "Get my car ready. I'll take 'er."

The truthful remarks reddened Ted Ballans' face above its sanguine hue. Throwing his captors off, he turned his attention to his wounded partner.

"Can you stand, honey? Let's try?"

He lifted her at the arm pits, allowing her feet to barely touch the floor.

"No, no!" the invalid moaned and sank against his breast.

"Show me the way outa this dump!" Ballans thundered.

He gathered the girl in his arms, glared his dramatics at everyone, and when the crowd parted in good old theatrical V shape, he strode out of the barroom.

As the clinking sound of spurs was relegated to the exterior by the closing door, the uproar of varied alibis began within. Everyone seemed to be intent on making it clear that he did not actually witness the accident.

"Everybody shut up!" Henry hurled in contempt. "I'm sorry; but it's the dame's fault—an' Ballans' for giving his gat to 'er. Anybody who can't see it that way can get his pan outa my house—now!"

His bloodshot eyes darted about with no tolerance in them.

The uneasy crowd shifted about on its inebriated legs. Eddie attracted Henry with a stiff drink. Some understanding soul started a Harlem rhythm on the drawing-room piano. The low-toned beat soon distilled the bombastic heat into an atmosphere of infectious, sensual enchantment. The party donned its narcotic pajamas.

Relaxing in the corner by the sandwich tray, Anna whispered to Alfred: "I wonder if I have become calloused? Am I a stoic, or what? I couldn't muster any sympathy for that girl."

"I don't think so," he returned under his breath. "You just see poor humanity passing by in kaleidoscopic view, and the mediocrity of it makes you indifferent. None of these people here are happy or they wouldn't be getting drunk. Of course, wondering who *is* happy gets me down whenever I ponder on the subject. It's the . . . "

Unable to formulate thought to his satisfaction caused him to pause disgustedly.

"Aw, it's the fumbling and groping of life that sickens," he concluded. "This party reeks with a

pathos that saddens the heart. Don't let me get started," he advised with a shake of his head.

"And why not?"

"You ought to know. Want me to go into a dance and do my soliloquy? Boy, there are lots of things I could mention that Hamlet failed to cover!"

Having no answer, she winked both eyes at him.

He smiled. Her mannerism of winking both eyes at once interested him; and to note that some of the sadness had left them gave him a sense of accomplishment.

"Someone's watching us," Anna mumbled carefully. "A man at the end of the bar. Let's get away from this food."

"We'll cut through here to the front room," he whispered, and parted the curtains covering a door near him.

Immediately they found themselves in a darkened room and zig-zagged between sprawled humanity. Being tendered no hearty welcome, they hurried to the opposite door which Alfred opened and closed apologetically.

The drawing-room atmosphere resembled a London fog, gray with cigarette smoke. Quite compelled, they stood absorbed in the lazy activities. Sinuous-looking characters were outlined against the furniture, and entwined about the floor like a football scrimmage.

A marcelled youth, with a cigarette pasted to his lower lip, sat astride a piano bench, tickling the ivory keys with a salacious touch. He accompanied a goo-eyed platinum blonde who moaned odd phrases through butter-ball lips.

The song was highly educational in describing the spontaneous combustion of an iniquitous Papa at one hundred degrees Centigrade.

With one hand, the blonde clung leech-like to the neck of the accompanist, with the other, she waved time to a couple supine under the piano.

Enjoying their flat-on-the-back position, the couple were hot at flat-foot tap-dancing against each other's sole-bottoms.

A huge bulk of a man on a divan made room for Anna and Alfred by drawing a drowsy girl to his lap, happy for the opportunity. Instantly, Anna placed her lips close to Alfred's ear.

"Guess who he is?"

"Who do you mean?"

"The man next to me with the brunette on his lap?"

"It's George Stinzel."

"Correct! What do you suppose he'll think when he finds my note pinned to the cushion in his car?"

After a glance at the producer, Alfred shrugged. "He's plenty tight. 'Confused,' as Eddie might say. By the time he discovers your message, he'll be jittery and think it's from the Black Hand."

The man who had deliberately hoaxed her out of a few needed dollars became tremendously interesting to Anna. As if absorbed by the piano funsters, she watched him through the corner of her eye; then became bolder, scrutinizing the magnate, body and soul, with the carefree immodesty of a sightseer.

In her abandoned state, she found great delight in allowing her mental conception of distaste to run riot. With a rising hate, she watched his rotund corpulence sinking deeply into the cushions; and through half-closed eyes, enjoyed the manner in which his features seemed to magnify.

"He looks like a locomotive," she whispered to Alfred.

Putting accusations into his tone, he jested: "Don't tell me you're havin' fun, Anna?"

"Yes, I am. He makes me sick!"

She turned squinting at the producer again. It annoyed her terribly when she could not satisfy her loathing with crude enough comparisons.

His whole make-up suggested a worm. A woolly worm, she thought. Then she considered a jellyfish, a jewfish, a whale. A cobra, she corrected to a spider, and concluded on a monkey; for just now he was having quite a time wiggling about in an effort to create a suitable lap for the relaxed feminine vine attached to him.

George Stinzel looked tired. His large cheeks sagged and deep circles of purple under his eyes gave him the appearance of a quack hypnotist. He acted like one who had finished a long, enduring task. World-weary, he emitted heavy sighs, opening and closing his parrot eyes like a bird intent on sleep yet fearful of surrounding danger.

Each time he opened his eyes, his fat, hairy hand patted the girl's shoulder, consolingly a few times, in rhythm with the piano. It was a paternal, all-is-well sort of gesture. Then he would close his lids again for a brief moment, before repeating the strange routine.

"Lithen!" the blonde at the piano lisped. "Evahpoty lithen thu th' chorus of Boppie's new s-song."

No one paid the slightest attention until the man with the air-bladder slipped up behind her, awaiting a golden opportunity.

Bobby vamped boredly. The blonde sang off key:

"Oh, you little so-and-so!
I could go for you I know."

When her cavern opened to pronounce the second *oh,* the bladder fell viciously across her mouth. The Sadist included Bobbie for being accessory to the crime, and ran from the room amid vociferous laughter and numerous raspberries.

In a speedy exit, the flushed girl hurled some statements fiery enough to produce a vacuum.

The cessation of piano music caused a stir in the room. Conversation began, increasing fast and furiously until it sounded like foundry hammers. Anna cupped her ears.

"Lord! Listen to the awful rigmarole, Alfred."

" . . . Garbo? . . . Russia's okay with . . . Crawford's . . . plan . . . Love me? . . . politics . . . You're crazy . . . like numerology . . . a science like . . . gin . . . astrology . . . and orange juice . . . is phooey . . . Garbo's actin' is . . . Nuts! You're thinkin' of . . . Love . . . is science . . . and democratic . . . Love me? . . . You screwy, blonde mug!"

The last remark overtoned everything.

The din stopped as quickly as the snapping of a radio switch. Then a raspy voice quoted:

" 'Mug!' There's an idea. Mug o' beer. Henry's got imported stuff."

A number of sleepers scrambled to their feet like waiting-room passengers subconsciously alert for a train call. Some sat down again, embarrassed, as if responding too quickly to a porter's warning wail. The rest followed their stomachs toward the bar.

"It proves something, to use your expression," Anna muttered.

"It proves Darwin was right."

"Einstein, you mean. It proves that beer and bar are relative."

Shaking his head, Alfred pointed to the couple on the floor under the piano.

"Behold the exemplification of the Darwinian theory," he jested.

Quite a profound game was in heated progress under the Chickering. The tap-dancing boy and girl had gone poetic in a contest of literary couplets, amazingly difficult to define. They lay facing each other, each with one hand held menacingly above his partner, ready to deal a blow.

"You're a heel!" the girl shouted.

"Heal as in medicine?" parried the boy.

He seemed to have made a grand slam, or literary strike, for he raised his hand wickedly; but his partner stopped the blow before the count of three, screaming:

"Heel like in villain!"

The boy's wits failed him. After the count, she feigned a blow to the body, then changed its course and drew red corpuscles on his cheek. Cruel, but according to the rules.

"You're drunk!" the youth accused, rubbing his cheek.

"Drunk as in prohibition?"

The game was on again.

"Now, Anna," Alfred said in amazement, "you just can't say that that isn't edifying. Why, it's

positively eloquent. It should be called 'Illiteration.' No," he corrected. "I have it, 'Moronology'!"

She winked both eyes at him. "And I suppose you're going to say that it proves something?"

"Yes, it does. It proves we're insane to listen. Yes," he visioned. "Moronology! Something new. See what we're going to miss, Anna. Hollywood will go mad over it. It'll bet it's all psychogenic, and we're just too stupid to decipher it."

Suddenly the girl on George Stinzel's lap said: "When you gotta go you gotta go!" rousing the producer unfairly from pleasant coma. He rose to straighten out the crepe-paper effect in his trousers, met Anna's gaze, and struggled for intelligent speech, helplessly.

"How are you, Miss Hall?" he finally blurted out.

Controlling a hateful impulse, Anna replied: "Too numb to account for myself in my present mood."

"I guess most everyone feels the same way, lately," he returned in a kindly voice. "Well, everyone has his troubles." He got his hulk placed uncomfortably on the divan again, and moaned: "Ah, troubles!"

"My—my!" Anna said with needle-like sarcasm. "Don't tell me that a man like you has troubles, Mr. Stinzel?"

A sad smile played tag about the producer's mackerel mouth.

"Huh!" he grunted. "You actors think you have all the bum breaks. You should finance a few pictures and get acquainted with some real torture. And how do you feel, Mr. Garey?"

"I think I feel as Anna does."

An awkward silence was relieved by two men swerving in from the neckatorium. They stood, arm in arm for a brief moment, in drunken oscillation like a comic vaudeville team; then reeled over against Alfred who, with a firm hand, straightened them up to a Pisa angle. In flannel-mouthed sincerity, the taller one introduced his pal:

" 'Sisis Oscar Tillen. His wife's just left 'im, an' we gotta help 'im forgit—have a drink?"

Alfred refused. George Stinzel refused. The team disembarked unsteadily, described a circle and fell into a corner. They hit the floor in such a comfortable position that the thought of moving was preposterous. With filmy eyes, they gaped idly about.

George Stinzel said: "Recurring, this is my meaning: You should be glad that you are actors instead of being . . . "

"Cooler as in jail!" came from under the piano.

" . . . a producer," Stinzel lifted his voice.

After a loud smack, the boy cried: "Wow! Are you skinny."

"I can't hear you, Mr. Stinzel," Anna complained.

"No wonder!" The magnate threw a glance of

disapproval under the piano. "I said, Miss Hall, that . . . "

Shrill laughter rang annoyingly against the producer's ears, but he carried on regardless.

"Everyone loves to use the word *flop*. So a picture's a flop until it's proved innocent." He smiled sadly. "The whole world has gone critic. It's easier to tell the other fellow where he's wrong than to produce anything. Just finance a picture, then . . . "

"You burn me plenty!" echoed like a trumpet.

" . . . you'll find that acting is better. It's . . . "

"Hot as in passion?"

"Hot like in tamale!"

"Hot like in hot Mama—an' burn as in washed-up!"

Quite enraged, the executive rose to his full height, which wasn't much; but his Napoleonic stature shook with indignation. With disgust, he assailed the Moronology participants in terms which exploded some fine Solomonic wisdom. Then he appropriated their style, and brayed:

"Nuts as ballyhoo! And ha, ha, like in Hollywood!"

Having caused an impressive silence, he normalized his tone to invite Anna and Alfred to the bar with him.

Everyone sat dismayed while the three made their exit in that honorable calm attended dignitaries who leave a function before its finale.

Unable to restrain himself, the executive yelled from the hall:

"Tight as in Scotch! And screwy as in motion pictures!"

CHAPTER IV

GEORGE STINZEL hurried down the hall quite proud of himself. He passed Anna courteously and, with outstretched elbows, made a wake for her to the bar.

"May I have a stool for a lady?" he begged.

A somniferous-looking individual gave him a caustic glance, relented, and slunk away to seek peaceful hibernation.

Alfred stood on Anna's right. Stinzel squeezed his contour in to her left and rapped upon the bar.

"Make us laugh, Eddie! Go crazy!" he requested gloomily. "And how 'bout a drink with a kick?"

Like a tired waiter, Eddie whined: "All kicks come to those who wait. What'll it be, colored gas or ethyl? And remember . . . "

"One more mile per gallon!" Stinzel finished for him. "Okay, Eddie, mine's colored. And you, Miss Hall?"

"What do I get if I say 'no'?"

"You get gin!" the producer exclaimed, and

laughed with his eyes closed. Knowing his banter to be hollow, he pleaded: "A laugh, Eddie. A laugh for a melancholy fellow."

A high-cackling voice on his left, caused the producer to cup his ears to nurse his jumping nerves.

"That's Hollywood for you!" a girl accused. "Yeah—Hollywood technocracy: I'll give you somethin' if you give me somethin' first."

Stinzel relaxed. "That's no Hollywood invention," he stated tersely. "That's a banker's slogan."

Anna sat wondering why she had accepted his invitation to the barroom; the imparity was gulf-wide between them. Desiring greater insulation from his touch, she rearranged her skirts on his side. After watching him down two Bourbons, she attempted to detect his dilemma, wondering what he might be trying to drown with liquor.

She was aroused by someone touching her on the shoulder.

"Miss Hall. Durante now—or the sea lion?"

"Hey!" Eddie bellowed. "Out you go, Ned Rank! She don't want Tony the Horse, either. Nor Mickie the Mouse. Nor any one of the Three Little Pigs!"

Eddie's straight-arm punch sent the comic sprawling. To conceal his humiliation, the little fellow shuffled down the passageway in imitation of Charlie Chaplin.

"That wasn't nice, Eddie." Anna bit her lip. "That was cruel—and not at all like you."

"Sorry I shoved him so hard. But he's dizzy or he wouldn't have toppled over. Aw, he's a pest and a hiccup! Just an ol' corn plaster."

"Oh—oh! A new one. What's a corn plaster?" Stinzel asked.

"A guy who arrives with a cheap jag."

The producer shrugged regretfully. "Afraid I'm a corn plaster, Eddie. I was that way on arrival."

Eddie's treatment of the lowly, would-be comic had given Anna an icy reaction. Then remembering her covenant with herself: not to sympathize any more with poor, frail humanity, she turned to George Stinzel for solace. But he surprised her with remarks of pity concerning Ned Rank's failure as an actor, and his pathetic attempts at parlor comedy.

The executive struck a maternal chord for a moment or two, then again, like a broken radio set, the lower wave length clashed dissonantly. Her will overpowered, she sent vicious thought in his direction. A strong desire to jump upon a table and denounce him for a despicable miser persisted. Indecision caused her pulse to pound. The mental battle usurped her strength.

A fracas started in the kitchen. It grew in proportions. Everyone in the barroom stood inert, expecting to hear pistol shots.

After an awful thud, and a pause, a bloody-faced man stuck his head through the swinging door, demanding first-aid supplies from the butler. In no uncertain terms, he advised everyone to mind his own business.

Anna caught a "stay calm" wink from Eddie and whispered to George Stinzel: "Gee! What an Eastern columnist wouldn't write about this party."

With sagging eyes, and a faraway look, the executive said: "Wrong impressions of Hollywood shouldn't burn you. I'll admit they don't write about the beauty of the Coast. Whether they see it or not, it makes dull reading for a waiting mass."

He discharged a heavy sigh through loose lips.

"Yep," he carried on, "it's too bad that humanity is on such a low level that it waits with curiosity to read who has made a mistake since yesterday."

The actors exchanged astonished expressions.

"I'm just as sick of it all as you are." Stinzel straightened up to deliver a point: "Now, regardless of your personal views on lynching, aren't you just a little nauseated at having to live in a world where humans strip a tree of its bark for souvenirs, after the hanging is over. Get this! Yesterday's paper told of a tree that had to be cut down because people molested it."

Shaking off his moralizing, he requested a drink.

"Lookit!" Eddie kidded. "Your elbow's been

playin' chess with the last one I served you."

"So it has. Guess I must be gettin' tight. That's what I meant to do."

"Confused," Eddie corrected, and drew his head in and out like a turtle.

"No, I'm a corn plaster, Eddie. I entered with liquor concealed within. But it didn't take effect."

Eddie raised a polished tray before his eyes.

"Take it away!" the executive cried. "I'm tired of looking at that face."

A voluptuous, flame-haired girl caused attention by emerging from the dark hallway. She was a maiden of many winters, and a few hot summers. Under purple-tinted lids, she scanned the room for new faces.

Presently a terrifying scream rang against the walls.

Four boys had pounced upon the creature. They carried her, screaming and cursing, to the bathroom where they ducked her in a tub of water prepared for the purpose.

Compensation's law had worked swiftly. She had been paid in full for passing out innocent-looking chewing gum which was sugar-coated laxative. Howls of laughter followed her dripping form as she ran up stairs to enter complaint with Henry Mun.

"Recurring—as we usually do—Miss Hall," Stinzel expounded again. "You see, there's no one at

this affair worth writing about. And so, no copy."

Eddie leaned in. "Why, Mr. Stinzel, how you do talk! We have a celebrity. How 'bout the Viscount in the drawing-room."

The producer's eyes sank into his flesh while he laughed.

"Sure, Eddie. I saw 'im. The goof is as low as I am—monarch of all he surveys—on the floor behind the settee. The poor Viscount is a discount. Now don't you top that one! Gotta let me get away with a pun now an' then."

He pushed Eddie's face away with a playful blow.

"You Irish mug," he assured, "you know there's not a star in the house—no, not even a satellite."

"Only one Israelite," Eddie topped.

"Very good, Eddie. Now lay off me while I tell Miss Hall somethin' important."

"Sure—gimme the bird an' I'll go."

"Gimme a drink an' I'll go. . . . Now that that is over, Miss Hall, we resume." Stinzel lowered his voice. "No one of importance is here. I know I don't count. I'm only here because I like Henry," he alibied. "An' Eddie," he added sincerely. "Nice people wouldn't have me around in my frame of mind."

He shook an accusing finger.

"An' I have a hunch that you both are in a simi-

lar state. Yes, sir! Neither of you belong at this party. How'd you happen to come is the question. Riddle me that? Have a drink?"

Anna's antipathy began to cool, but revived when she again heard him confess to business trouble. A cruel bit of sarcasm hovered for utterance. She was still considering him as a contemptuous thief, quite as bad as the commercial coward who takes the widow's mite in exchange for worthless gilt-edged paper, bearing impressive red seals and florid signatures.

Apropos of nothing, Stinzel said: "Nope, there's not enough love in this ol' world. But someday it'll change. Someday the lamb will lie down with the lion."

"That time is now!" Eddie leaned in. "The lamb lies down with the lion daily—right here in Hollywood. The lamb lies down inside the lion."

The wheeze went well enough to inspire Eddie into dialect.

"Come on," Stinzel urged. "Get hot, Eddie."

"For Anna's sake," Eddie winked. "She likes imitations. I have a very nice—I should say excellent; I *will* say excellent—imitation of ice cream on a hot day. No kiddin', I must learn that sea lion imitation. I must keep in the swim," he concluded, and shuffled to the end of the bar, calling someone an amphibian.

Seeming lonely, with a strong desire to talk, the

producer went serious, expounding and amplifying his ideas on a wide range of everything; and scoffing quite a bit, as if his words would, fanlike, blow the fumes of stagnant earth away.

He soaked the air with whiskey all about him, yet he held the attention of his guests. At times, he talked like one inspired, as if his mind had left his body, having no more need of it. There was a thickness to his speech—and no academic completeness to some of his statements—but his ideas rang true, surprisingly true, with brilliant thought behind them, as spiritual as air.

Anna saw a miniature Disraeli in the abnormal meditative hunger with which his soul cried out to liberate his fellow man. Yet not a Disraeli, she retracted, on hearing him express futility concerning any present aid, admitting that the tide would have to run its course.

"And tax!" he flouted bitterly. "Why, it's impossible to amass a fortune any more. One year I pay fifty-two percent income tax, an' starve the next. I say if the individual rises fortunate enough to help support the government, then it should protect him if he should start to fail. There's a thought for a glorious Utopia."

Heatedly he downed a whiskey in one gulp.

"An' what's goin' to happen if corporations cut production in half to avoid tax?" he asked. "That'll not help the workin' man. Hell! There's too much

talk about freedom when everything's laid out before you with a take-it-or-leave-it proclamation. Everybody's sick of it! An' I'll just bet you that within ten years all the thinkers in the country will be slowed down to the non-productive low gear of mediocrity. You kids will see it!"

"Better pipe down," Eddie kidded. "Someone'll think you're full of treason."

"That ain't what I'm full of, Eddie. Come on, ol' Irish wit, say somethin' funny. Somethin' funny that's low-down."

"A one-legged turtle is funny an' low-down."

"Lower and funnier, Eddie, 'cause I'm as low as an empty pocket."

Eddie reflected. "Speakin' of low-down things, I think I'll go an' rouse Henry Mun."

Innocently the producer asked where he was.

"Oh, for shame!" Eddie admonished. "If I told you that he had other fish to fry, should I look for 'im in the kitchen?"

Stinzel waved him away with a floppy hand. His eyes rested upon an empty stool and he snatched it gratefully, moaning about his feet.

Disposition like an airedale, Anna thought, as she saw him light the last cigarette from his pack. She watched him get fixed for the night like a selfish traveler; and felt prompted to scream when he concentrated his parrot-eyes upon her like a hypnotist.

Then the producer shocked her beyond explanation.

"Which reminds me," he admitted softly. "Miss Hall, I owe you sixty-seven dollars and fifty cents back salary?"

Anna's body quaked, then she sat as still as a wax figure.

"Correct," Stinzel said, answering his own question, and turned to extract a check-fold and fountain pen from his pocket.

Spellbound and speechless, Anna stared at him with the wide-eyed gaze of a child that tries to comprehend the seemingly impossible.

Oh, my God! she said in her heart. This is another of those hideous dreams. Yes, a dream within a dream! She was probably asleep now, tossing upon her pillow, subconsciously pondering what to say to the hotel manager concerning her over-due bill.

Seconds passed.

In an effort to ascertain reality, she ran her hand along the bar; but touching the producer's arm carried no conclusive proof. Then she remembered Alfred and turned to him.

He also seemed to be a part of the apparition until she saw him frowning down at Stinzel's check book, evidencing minute jerks of his head which meant "no" while his expressive eyes said "yes."

Electric shocks began at her heels, enlivening her whole body, ending at her forehead with the

strength of a vibrator. A violent chemicalization began churning within her; for every discolored thought tnat she had ever entertained against a hateful world suddenly assembled in court before her mind, demanding retributive justice.

Yielding, a mist covered her eyes. Then she looked past George Stinzel's rough exterior; past the blood-patched cheeks, the mackerel mouth and the shaking hand signing her life-saving reprieve, to something finer.

Ineffable happiness welling up within, made her ignore unwelcome tears. Everything was clear and simple now. She would merely turn to Stinzel and thank him perfunctorily. But when she attempted it, no sound came. With a helpless gesture, she excused herself to go nose-powdering.

The executive labored in a stupor over his check stubs, like one who is afraid of overdrawing an account. Irritated, he looked up at Alfred, requesting a cigarette.

"No got," Alfred said, trying to be jovial. "Been trying to mooch one myself."

When Anna moved in between them, she wore the angelic smile of which she was so capable when the odds were not too great against her. Her eyes were washed as clear as a babe's; and something, beyond the power of rouge, had incarnadined her cheeks. With a simple gesture, she accepted the producer's check.

"My apologies," he said several times. "Sometimes I cannot pay; but I never forget. However, you'd have received it in the morning's mail. I have plenty more to make out when I get drunk enough to go home. Thought you might need it tonight."

There was mystery in his tone, and he tried to coax a smile.

Thinking Anna stymied for conversation, Alfred said: "I guess everyone needs money these days," then hated himself for the banality.

"Everyone needs a drink." The producer changed the subject. "Let's be happy and laugh, folks. Oh, Ed-ee!" he sang out in a cracked chest register.

Attempting to break the spell which he knew his payment had caused, he snatched a cigarette from Eddie's mouth, lifted Anna's arm and, with each puff, blew a silver-looking bracelet about her wrist.

"Glad I saw you tonight—both of you." He leaned in confidentially, the smoke flowing from his lungs like an idle locomotive. "I think you're swell people, and deserve a break." After the steady gaze of a physiognomist, he read: "That is, if you don't do the silly thing you both have been contemplating . . . I told you that I was a bit of a mystic," he recalled. "Be sure you don't!" he pleaded. "I won't mention it again."

When he turned to Eddie, demanding matches, Anna whispered close into Alfred's ear.

With an understanding nod, Alfred darted out of the barroom. As opportunity afforded, he flipped the frontdoor catch so he could re-enter unattended, and skipped across the street to the producer's car.

It gave him a rare feeling of satisfaction to be able to destroy even the smallest serpent that might annoy George Stinzel.

Deep in meditation, he stood tearing the note and reshaping the hairpin Anna had used. His eyes raised toward the moon, now full in the heavens, wondering what quotation she had been trying to recall, and why.

"Dark with excessive bright", flashed into his mind which gave him a cold reaction. He thought of the darkness which the night might hold if he found himself locked out of his hotel room when he returned. *If* he returned, he wanted to think, but doubted his courage; for George Stinzel's incredible admonition was thrown upon the scale with all the black memories his heart had stored away.

A satisfied jerk of his hand sent the last of the note to its grave on the dark earth.

He slunk like a dog across the street, and was forced to dodge an elegant town-car. The fleeting glimpse of beautifully groomed men and women prompted an aching desire for the haven of environment and intellectual anchorage.

Then a suffocating billow of fog engulfed him;

and like Anna, he doubted his sanity. Balanced with a desire to live were clammy, mortiferous thoughts, barking like wolves for his carcass.

"Worlds upon worlds" came a sharply announced quotation to his mind, as if it might be the name of the opus now being presented to his arid senses. . . . If he could but interpret it.

The spring in his brain had been given an extra wind. A penetrating analysis of Anna Hall began tormenting him. An avalanche of thought knocked in frenzied tattoo for solution, the least postulate of which was why this girl had been thrown at his feet when total indifference possessed him.

One thing was true: if a man could not muster interest in a breath of spring like her, he must be already dead—burial was merely a matter of ritual —and a good idea, to keep from contaminating others. All proving, he argued unconsciously, that a weighty problem could absorb one to the exclusion of sex-desire.

"Well, well," he mumbled, coming to earth, "apologies to Freud!" and moved on up the steps, reasoning one more hypothesis his way.

Stinzel's check would probably swerve Anna away from her morbid course. The money would no doubt untie the Gordian knot; change the entire chemistry of her being—a symbol that greater miracles might follow in its wake.

"The great break," he prophesied. What everyone beseeches at the Hollywood wailing wall. Yes, miracles do happen like that now and then, he concluded, even in Heartbreak Town.

He flung the door open incuriously and stood newly baptized in the fetid atmosphere of the party.

"Can 'er!" a vicious voice impinged his ears.

A screaming female ran down the hallway with a boy following close enough to slap her continually upon the buttock with an empty hot-water bottle. The two galloped like children playing fire-engine, making a circuit of several rooms.

From behind a half-open door, the man with the bladder reached out and fouled the boy across the mouth.

Apparently undismayed, the youth continued the race. But he prepared his revenge en route. When the chase brought him to the same location again, and the demon raised the bladder to repeat the offense, the boy threw the contents of an ash tray into the sadistic one's face.

Howls of agony issued from the suffering man. Blindly he groped, reeled, waddled and writhed up and down the hall to the amusement of all who had witnessed the retaliation.

"Frankenstein!" a pernicious one shouted.

" 'A Daniel come to judgment!' " an aged actor quoted.

Henry Mun dashed feverishly to the scene. When

enlightened, he laughed with the others and led the penitent sufferer to the bathroom.

Alfred squeezed his way through to the barroom where he found Eddie having much trouble with a tottering blonde who was pugnaciously inclined. Stinzel had his arms spread over the bar with a weary head snugly resting in them. Sensing that he was dead to the world, Alfred indicated the street and whispered to Anna:

"Finis."

The producer's drunken ears picked up the word. Without moving, he speculated: "That's descriptive enough for most anything," and laughed until he coughed.

Wild whoops and jubilation caused everyone but Stinzel to rush toward the drawing-room. In the crowded hall, Alfred lifted Anna to a chair.

"What can you see?" he asked, craning his neck.

A little fellow, appearing no more than ten year of age, was performing acrobatic feats while smoking a cigar nearly as long as himself.

"It's a dwarf tumbler," Anna relayed.

Drunk with applause, the midget tried to extend himself. Scuttling across the floor, he did a nip-up, landed upon his manager's back and jumped to the chandelier like a monkey.

Crumbling plaster followed the chandelier and the dwarf to the floor. The house was plunged in darkness.

Under pretence that the house was on fire, two boys ran in with a garden hose. They played blind man's bluff, drenching everyone who made a sound.

Amid gales of laughter and paroxysms of noisy activity, Alfred guided Anna onto the veranda. As he passed under the iron grill, he plucked a thread of hanging vine and placed it under her nostrils.

"Here, inhale this," he persuaded, "and forget the past."

"Oh, wonderful, Alfred! May I go ga-ga and say *gorgeous?*"

"Go as far as you like. Anything sweet after that party will be a relief."

"Pretty terrible, wasn't it?"

"Right!"

"Still," Anna modified, "I suppose we shouldn't criticize. Had the fact slipped your mind that we weren't invited?"

"Yes, I think I had. That's about the same as getting 'comps' to a theatre and going away panning the show, isn't it?"

She ran her arm through his. Silently they strolled toward Hollywood Boulevard.

CHAPTER V

A SHORT way down the street, Anna broke the silence.

"Alfred," she asked, meditatively, "do you get up early in the morning?"

He answered crazily: "I would, if I thought that I was an early bird instead of a worm."

"My—my, Mr. Garey! That's far too much humor. I see food makes a difference—no more meat for you."

"Don't worry. The humor will wear off. At any rate I promise not to play Moronology with you. You should be grateful for that. Now, what was your question?"

"Tell you in a minute. I'm making a wish by the moon."

Gazing up through tall, conical fir trees, she wobbled on his arm like a child.

"It may sound hackneyed, Alfred, but the moon is a great symbol of peace, isn't it?"

As they swung around a corner, the unobstructed moon bathed her with beauty enough to call for

an ecstatic gasp. Jerking him to an abrupt halt, Anna concentrated upon the sky.

"Alfred, what is that—you know—about the moon rising on the just and the—whatever it is?"

"You've gone giddy about the moon. What you mean is rain. It rains on the just and the unjust alike."

The philosophy sent them both into meditation.

Anna thought about a certain banker. Alfred pondered on justice in general; for predominant in his mind was the thought of tomorrow's bread, if he intended allowing the dawn of a tomorrow.

"What place was that we just passed?" she asked.

"The Masquers."

"Oh, yes—actor's club—do you belong?"

"Did," he replied sullenly. "Did belong. Everything seems to be in the past."

The unpleasant statement stifled conversation.

When she swung him into a side street, he looked about, intending to ask where she was leading him; but a spell of apathy made him too tired too formulate a query.

"It can't be so late," Anna observed. "I see that the electric cross is still illuminated on the hill where they hold the Pilgrimage Play."

She glanced up and shook his arm playfully.

"Say! Am I talking to myself? Evidently I am." Down the scale she sang: "Or—do—you—care?"

"No," he answered too quickly.

"No, what?"

"Yes and no," he said to befuddle her.

"Don't act like that," she pleaded; then went into ecstasies about a row of flowering acacia trees.

He could feel her emotion through their locked arms. This change in her, he reasoned, was caused by the possession of a little money. Of course, that was enough to make an apostate out of a stoic. If such luck had bowed to him, he could, with unrestricted glee, throw gin bottles into any hotel court.

"But it is a gorgeous sight, Alfred. Look!"

To please her, he said: "Right!"

The discolored fascination which had dangled before Anna's mind for weeks, faded as she viewed the night with all the symbols of the Infinite.

"Everything is so beautiful!" she intoned without restraint. "Oh, Albert, why did God make the night?"

A little annoyed, he replied flippantly, in the tone of a tired business man: "Shall I tell you now, or shall I write you a letter covering it? Perhaps you would like our new brochure on the subject."

A retching sound of apprehension sounded in her throat.

"You bad boy! This is an exceptional night."

Still under the spell of the party, he jabbered insanely: "Night'll knock yuh nutty if . . . "

The silly illiteration was interrupted by her hand over his mouth.

He broke away, clowning: "Night as in nightie? Or night as in . . . "

"Alfred! You promised you wouldn't. Please. It isn't fair to spoil my inspiration because you don't happen to feel the same way. Don't be selfish. That's not like you. I'm sure it couldn't be. You're a philosopher at heart. By the way, that's where I'm taking you—to a shrine."

Her words finally penetrated.

"Just what do you mean," he resented, "about taking me to philosophy?"

"Just that. I'm taking you to a man who always uplifts me—whenever I need uplifting—we pull together for the shore."

"This elevating business is quite something to be desired; but isn't it a late hour to make a call? Who is this benevolent individual?"

"My singing instructor."

Aggressively, he inquired: "And does he accomplish this miracle by the chromatic or the religious scale?"

"That isn't nice. He isn't religious. He's a vocal teacher who happens to be a philosopher, and a dear person."

"So, we leave Henry and go from Bacchus to the Lord?"

"Maybe something like that."

"Well, 'Man's extremity'!" he quoted.

"See! I told you that you were a philosopher."

His head shook with conviction.

"What else is there to be but a philosopher when you've got 'That Hollywood Sign'?"

"Guess I'm thick. What does that mean?"

"You must have heard that before. They coined it after a girl jumped off that huge real-estate sign up in the hills. You're supposed to have That Hollywood Sign if you wear a hang-dog expression for too long at a time. It means suicide."

"I don't like it; and I'll appreciate it if you don't mention it again."

He bowed in mock ceremony. "We're not getting along so well, do you think?" His voice was cool.

She maladroitly expressed a hope that they would.

"Good-night, then," he said courteously and left her puzzled.

She called to him. He returned with careless stride. She put a few words together in apology, and they shuffled along side by side, indifferently. Shortly she had him laughing with life ringing in his tones.

"My dear little girl," he claimed, "you want too much for one night."

While passing a small grove, Anna had insisted that she could smell orange blossoms.

"Wrong time of year," he teased. "You're funny!"

"Anyhow, I got a laugh out of you. And that's miracle enough."

"Right!"

They turned into a blind street, one block long.

"Tell me," he asked, "where does this man live who is going to make you so happy?"

Disappointedly she returned: "Here, but it won't matter now. Someone is paying him a visit."

She indicated a parked car.

"Anyhow, I want you to get a look at his garden, so we'll just stroll by the place."

As they approached a dark-green roadster studded with interesting accessories, Anna asked: "Whom do you know that owns a Rolls-Royce?"

He chuckled. "Don't make me laugh. I don't know anyone who even owns a fliv, with the possible exception of Edna Allar."

They paused. Admiring eyes swept the elegant car and its equipment.

"Edna's a girl who'll die with her spurs on," Anna eulogized, not intending to. "You'll never see her straddling that real-estate sign on the hill for a jump into the future. Of course, she has her mother. Say—get me off of this subject!"

"I will. Tell me what you think of that fellow George Stinzel?"

"I don't know what to think. Haven't fathomed it all out. I'll drop him a note of thanks in the morning. Let's get off of that subject, too," she

signed, and laughed artfully. "Come on, guess who owns this car—doctor, lawyer, merchant? Stop me somewhere."

"I'll stop you by looikng at the license card. It seems to me that I'm the official car-looker-into, tonight. I missed my calling. I should run an advertisement advising: If you want to know whose car you're driving, call Alfred Garey."

"Ix-nay!" Anna hissed. "Someone just came out onto the veranda with Signor. He's leaving—whoever he is—let's walk slowly down the pathway and wait in the garden."

They passed through a privet hedge with a scattered bloom like snowflakes. The delicate fragrance was soon absorbed by the heavy odor of rose geranium bordering a gravel pathway. The walk circled through magnolia trees with chaliced flowers, seeming whiter than white against the sheen of the night; and split at a pool where two turtles slept on mossy rocks.

Anna paused to inhale the fragrance of a rose bush. "My, there's a scent seldom caught by any chemist. I wonder why it is so difficult?"

"Can't imagine. The ancients called the rose the symbol of secrecy, so perhaps it hasn't given in yet."

"Silly!" she said too loudly and choked back a giggle with the handkerchief he had lent her. "Swell!" she whispered. "I'm glad to know that

you're coming out of the kinks, in a better frame of mind."

"But I'm not," he informed. "You forget, Anna, that the possession of money has changed your aspect. Regardless of the small sum, it has."

"Hasn't it changed you, too?" Then she stood astonished. "Why, Alfred Garey, do you suppose for one moment that I didn't mean to divide with you—after the peculiar way in which it came, and all?"

"Please don't misunderstand me. My reference was merely to prove a theory," he went on, hardly able to. "Am I paradox? I haven't been just belly hungry; I've been hungry for a lot of things. How can I prove my point?" He paused momentarily. "I guess I'm all mixed up."

He had intended explaining his distaste for "the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to," with clarity; but inutility cooled the desire at birth. Instead, he heaved a sigh, mumbling: "I'm fed up!" as everyone does in such a mental fog.

"Now, Alfred, listen. There won't be enough money to pay a hotel bill; but . . . " Quickly she decided to make light of her gift. " . . . won't you take half? The ol' inner man could acrobat for days on such a budget. Don't be an ol' meany!"

To distract her, he said: "That looks like Harold Lock standing on the porch."

Anna turned toward the house, medium-small

and comfortable looking, behind a row of catalpa trees.

"You're right. Wonder why he called on the Signor at this time of night?"

Alfred eulogized: "He's a star I admire more than anyone on the screen. Guess he's a swell person. Everyone gives him a rave. Nothing hammy in anything he does. And wealthy as hell, they say."

"Plenty!" Anna intoned a million into it.

After a mysterious crunch-crunch on the gravel, a collie dog appeared out of the shadows, with a wagging tail of welcome to the estate of peace.

"Who is in the garden, please?" a kindly voice was broadcast from the veranda.

"It is I, Signor—Anna Hall with a friend. I was hoping that we might see you for a few moments, but didn't want to interrupt."

"You may come now," the welcoming voice echoed.

CHAPTER VI

THEY APPROACHED a vine-covered veranda with a display of colorful, exotic plants about its balustrade.

Alfredo Florenzo, a rotund Italian in a wine-colored dressing-gown and slippers, moved forward to clasp Anna's outstretched hands. His smile made him look like a jolly friar. To Alfred, a painting by Leonardo da Vinci came suddenly to life.

"Are you too sleepy to see me and a friend for a few moments, Signor?" Anna asked, with a "please say yes" intonation.

The vocal teacher rebuked: "Shame on you, Anna! You know my theory regarding sleep. But just look at your host, in *veste da camera.*"

Modestly he tightened his robe at the throat, through which a soft white shirt enhanced the hue of his olive skin, and indicated floppy, run-down slippers which he evidently loved. His embarrassment vanished when he met Alfred, and introduced Harold Lock.

"Yes—yes, indeed," Anna stuttered, "I met Mr.

Lock sometime ago through Edna Allar."

She gushed a few sentiments about the actor's screen portrayals, hated herself for it, and flushed under the cool gaze of his handsome blue eyes.

"I shall remember those sincere compliments," Harold Lock said emphatically.

A conversational vacuum ensued.

The star threw on a handsome pale-tan motor coat which contrasted the sun-tan of his face and hands, and descended the steps while he talked.

"Give Edna Allar my regards," he commissioned, making conversation. "Swell girl, Edna. One of the best."

The collie ran up, affording him opportunity to scuffle with it while he cast cursory glances up at Anna. He bid adieu, regretting it, and moved unwillingly into the night.

"Look at this lovely side garden, Alfred."

Anna pointed to a lane ending at a swing.

"That's my lyceum," the Italian imparted. "I'm out there with my books whenever possible, to gain a little mental uplift."

"As if you needed it," Anna scoffed playfully, and passed through the screen door he held. "Alfred?" She turned. "The Signor says: 'The mind is to the body what the sun is to the universe.' I can't say that mine is. How about you?"

"We do fall short," the teacher lamented. "Very obstinately short. . . . Find chairs you will like."

While his host went about reducing the studio lighting to a parchment glow, Alfred scanned the room, respecting Anna for bringing him.

The academic-looking library at the far end, the concert-grand piano laden with stacks of opera scores, and the interesting antique furniture commanded his attention. He felt the vibrations of music and the atmosphere of philosophy converging to infect him with harmony; perceptibly a distinction from the dizzy maelstrom at Henry Mun's swollen nightmare, where oaths flew like flies against one's ears.

The instructor took a low-backed chair opposite them, apparently a favorite position. He seemed to like to lean his head against the curved casing of the piano, which evidenced a shiny spot from the oil of his jet-black hair.

There was a comfortable, peaceful pause.

Just as Anna was ready to launch into explanations, a screeching voice from out of a corner startled her.

"Just clucks! Just clucks! Just clucks!"

"Oh!" she exclaimed with her hand over her heart. "Your parrot, Signor. I had forgotten it. It's quite a bird, Alfred. It squawks slang and wise cracks like a trooper."

"Like a sailor," the teacher said sadly. "He was a gift from an Italian mariner. A little switch might serve to correct a dog, but what am I to do

with a naughty parrot that embarrasses me? I'll cover him and he'll be quiet."

"No, no!" Anna protested. "I love to look at his gorgeous coloring."

"Is the room too dark?" the *maestro* inquired.

"The lighting fits my mood." Anna hung her head. "And what a mood. Didn't you notice my eyes?"

The Italian lifted his eyebrows. "That's all right," he consoled. "Who was it that said: 'The soul would have no rainbow had the eyes no tears'?"

Anna smiled vacantly toward Alfred. "The Signor knows all the answers." To her teacher, she said: "Wait until we inflict our mood upon you."

"Not on me. You know me better than that, Anna."

She accepted the rebuke, and meant to correct her false start, but her tongue played tricks on her; then she spoke regretfully concerning their late call.

"Never mind the hour," the Signor pardoned. "I've told you I sleep but little. Half our earthly existence is spent in horizontal unconsciousness—if we allow it." He smiled benignly at each. "And human beings seem to like that stupid position best, finally succumbing to what we call death. But someday man will change his mind. He will

rest, of course, but he won't sleep at all. Your inventor, Mr. Edison demonstrated that far enough to inspire the rest of us."

Surprised, Anna wondered how her friend happened to arrive adjacent the subject of her confession. The sagely scholar seemed to know her thoughts before she uttered them; yet his black eyes acted as a panacea for nervousness. His whole make-up expressed a paternal and a maternal understanding blended into one. Unconsciously, she blurted out:

"You don't know Mr. Garey, of course, but you do know how bad and melancholy I am at times. Tonight, he and I found ourselves mutual in one respect: absorbed by the thought of suicide."

She hunched her shoulders and her hands dropped into her lap in a helpless gesture. After a false giggle, she said:

"What an introduction. What will you think of us?"

"Fine introduction," the sage relieved. "I don't know Mr. Garey, but I do know human nature and its thoughts. What we must do is to place such a suggestion into the oblivion of the past. What if you should commit such an act? Where will you be then? Merely disembodied souls, ready to start the pilgrimage all over again."

Wisely he allowed a pause.

"It may sound very theoretic, but I'm sure that

the only thing one is capable of doing by self-destruction is to start some sort of hibernation which we know not of. One must be intelligent enough to realize that he cannot end what he did not begin."

He wagged his head like a metronome, waiting for his words to accomplish their mission.

"Perhaps we should start with some light Socratic philosophy," he suggested; then his black eyes snapped indifference. "On the other hand, probably we shouldn't indulge at all. What is your pleasure?"

A moment later, he shrugged, relenting. After all, he would be tolerant. The years of understanding were not yet upon their heads. A twinkle appeared in his eyes.

"Shall we begin with the question as to which was first: the chicken or the egg?"

His humor touched no responsive chord.

"Go ahead," Alfred said resentfully, "if you think you can get it settled. Do you think you can?"

"Certainly. I just thought to make you children smile a little. You are so very serious—and you are children. Yes, we will settle it. We need to go to no less an authority than the Bible. The Book of Books tells us that the plant was before the seed. By the same reasoning we know that the chicken is an idea preceding the egg."

Anticipated humor faded from the faces of his guests.

"And so you see we are compelled to believe that we are just as eternal; for no idea is less than eternal. I have read somewhere that man was made upright. We know then, that he was not meant to stupidly sleep in a grave, or at night either, which is its symbol. So, even though our hypothesis began with a silly aspect, we prove that you cannot end your life no matter what you do. That power is not given you. Sometimes I ponder a little on why it appears as if it were."

"All right for theory," Alfred ventured. "Only theory, though."

With dignity, the Signor returned: "Everything that man can do—or ever has done—starts with theory. What other beginning is there? Yet it always receives the scoffers venom, from birth to maturity, at which time the skeptical shouts: 'I always did believe it'."

Through half-closed eyes and wide-open ears, Alfred gave the Italian a severe analysis.

As his interest grew, he noticed that the instructor was very young-looking, yet he felt certain that he was past the age of sixty, with an agile body, and very bright eyes—windows to a soul ever alert to render aid to his fellow man.

"Strange," the philosopher shook his head. "I

have just encountered something which fits your case exceptionally."

Crossing the room, he returned with a clipping cut from a magazine.

"I have been using it as a book mark. Listen, children, while I read you what a man, born blind, has to say after receiving his sight at the age of forty-one:

" 'There are numberless things about my new world and its sighted inhabitants that perplex me. But most outstanding is the fact that so many of you are oblivious to all the beauty around you—colors, flowers, trees, fields, mountains, skies, sunsets, moonlight and the sea, and all the glories of nature that make the world seem wonderful to me. I cannot help thinking that there is another kind of blindness worse than that of the eyes—blindness of the soul that keeps sighted people from really seeing the beauties of nature'."

Anna frowned, then hung her head. "Oh," she breathed softly, "that makes me feel so ungrateful!"

The teacher held the floor with added zest.

"Aristotle," he instructed, "said that we are what we repeatedly do. I know that we are what we repeatedly think. Children, you must keep your minds off of deadly things."

"What I repeatedly think has no good in it," Alfred returned ironically.

"There's some good in everything," the *maestro* assured. "Even zero amounts to something if placed behind a digit."

Listening to the teacher explain his ideas forced Alfred to admit that if plainness of intercourse and a liberal education were to be found in any temple, with love as a cornerstone, he was now in its midst. He opened his mouth to reveal his appreciation, when the parrot beat him by voicing his former opinion.

"A lotta hooey!" the bird squawked three times.

The trio laughed at their own seriousness.

"Ah, the parrot lightened your spirits when I had failed," the Signor sighed. "I should cover him."

Anna objected. "I think he has our number. Our number is thirteen, Polly. We're all wet. Can you say 'all wet'?"

"Nuts to you!" the parrot rasped.

Anna giggled. Alfred laughed with spirit. The Italian shook his head, rose and sat again, as exasperated as an embarrassed mother.

"I can do nothing," he apologized. "I'm afraid I must give it back to the sailor."

His guests settled down quiet again, expecting the philosopher to burst forth any moment with some weighty statement which might, like the proverbial lever, shake the universe.

After too long a pause, Anna asked with the sigh-

ing, "Ah, God! Ah, me!" coo of a dove: "Tell us why we should desire to live, Signor?"

"That's an easy one. You should desire to live to help others; and remember, I didn't imply that we should allow others to lean upon us.

"For instance, you now sit under a light that may be extinguished by the slightest move of your hand. Those who brought in the invention did it for more than mere remuneration—and at what personal cost? We don't even surmise. Yet we could get along without it. I remember, in my time, the use of much oil, gas, and some candlelight. There are three stages of development—for what reason? If those inventors had decided that it was useless to live, we might have waited years upon years for the luxury."

Alfred recalled: "Most people argue that the world owes them something."

"The common reasoning of human beings," the Signor disapproved. "We are the debtors. Everyone should be inspired with the thought of contributing, as if the earth were one large community garden. That's just what it could be if all selfish, and discordant thought were banished. Meliorism!" he said enthusiastically. "What do you think of the doctrine?"

"Suckers! Suckers! Suckers!" the parrot broke in.

"You be still, Mac!" the philosopher shouted, then closed his eyes in meditation.

"I was wondering," Alfred said, "just what that parrot was actually thinking?"

"As to the bird . . . " the teacher opened his eyes to gaze at the parrot. "To me a bird has demonstrated more wisdom, in one way, than all earthly creatures. If it could be true that we crawled out of the water centuries ago, as Mr. Wells outlines, with multiforms as a result—and we have every evidence that some animals chose to grow too large and became extinct—why, to me, the bird is the most fortunate. At will, he may fly away from the earth, for a time at least, if it sickens him. Not entirely grounded," he emphasized.

Alfred asked: "Then you allow your parrot the freedom of the outdoors?"

"Yes, indeed, among the trees; but I observe that it desires to come in the studio at night."

The colorful bird became the object of focus. The crack-crack of sunflower seed in its claws was all that interrupted while the *maestro* gained ground against the perplexed mentalities of his guests. He used every analogy he could marshall, in an attempt to prove that life was eternal; and that to attempt its end would place them in a changed form, in some indescribable limbo, far from desirable.

The homily was effecive. His guests sat listening as attentively as students watching a blackboard while a professor expatiates.

A professor he was; but not of physics. He needed no blackboard for any of his deductions; needed nothing but time in which to allow well-chosen words to act soothingly on tired, bruised souls. While some of his assertions were startling, they were also compelling and inspiring—allowing his listeners to feel that they were privileged to peek, for brief moments, through the lattice of some forbidden garden.

Like nursery children, wide-eyed and alert, his guests sat hoping that the story would not end too soon, with resultant darkness.

"It seems to be the plight of some people," the teacher informed, "That a sort of fatality makes them seek a long time for the light."

He talked on as if to himself.

"The magnet and the piece of steel is as good an illustration as any. I do not think we parallel the spiritual. The piece of steel represents the body; the magnet the mind. The steel is enervated, inert until ensouled by the magnet. Our brain is an antennae, accepting power from the Great Phenomena. Those who know we have none of our own, get along far better. By this recognition they accomplish without strain at a minimum of effort. We do accept this to some extent, subconsciously, or we would be nonexistent. When wholly accepted, what is called miracles are performed. Someday we will understand that we are *one* instead of *two*. At

that time there will not be a belief in body and soul, spirit and body, nor just body; but power itself—the spirit that ensouls anything—which some are prone now to call Mind.

"No, we are more or less familiar with a few of life's strange transfigurations such as the frog, the butterfly.

"We make such a transformation, and like the insect, we make this glorious transformation invisible to those who mourn our departure. What a pity that this promotion, this elevation, this graduation, hasn't always been looked upon as *continuance* instead of *stoppage*. Man is ever trying to stop something, looking for an end. What an uplifting feeling, if we had been taught always to say: 'He has been transformed,' or some such term, instead of: 'He died.'

"And so we stop talking about life before or life after a possible death, and talk of life's continuance. For life is that phenomena which has no beginning and no end.

"I, for one, would never consider suicide, through fear, if for no other reason. Fear that by so doing, the Divine Schoolmaster might rearrange a repetition of this earthly existence in some distasteful form—something that would be far greater chastening than our earthly teachers prescribe when we fail in our examinations—because it would be entirely self-inflicted."

The philosopher's eyelids opened.

"If I am wound up," he said in apology, "you are to blame. If I bore, you must stop me."

There was a moment of happy silence.

As the sage chose loftier subjects, the parrot, on which they rested their eyes, became the port of embarkation. They rose as in a motorless airplane, as noiseless as running oil, from mundane things—away from the kingdom of time and place on a neoteric voyage to obtain a cargo of rare merchandise.

Then gradually, as an airplane swoops to earth, barely touching at first in gentle salutation, the passengers realized that the ethereal journey was ended. The noise of shifting positions, and the cracking of sunflower seed on the parrot-stand, made them fully cognizant of earthly port.

Anna experienced a slight thud in her heart. She shuddered like a child on realizing that an absorbing story has been finished, and that someone will foolishly talk about the Sandman. She rose, preparing to depart, moving unconsciously toward the parrot.

Then there occurred that lengthy pause: guests feeling propriety urging them to bid adieu, regretting it.

"So you think that human nature is to blame for everything distasteful?" Alfred asked with a sigh in his tones.

"Certainly. Man is to blame for his intolerance, an attitude. The Brotherhood of Man will have to be evidenced in action, not merely talked about. We spout a good Christianity, you know; and won't emerge from our depression until each changes his attitude toward his fellow. It may sound saccharine, but it's true. That's why a depression was visited upon us. Ours is not a plague such as the world has experienced before. There is a plenty of everything. Brisbane has averred that your state of Texas could actually supply the world with its needs. Greed has caused hoarding until a bog of stagnation is the result."

"How true," Anna muttered.

"Of course it's true," the philosopher affirmed. "With all of man's knowledge, he doesn't know how to rearrange harmonious distribution again. It is all about the same as if one's blood supply suddenly went to one foot, and a renewal of circulation was attempted by incantation. Talk—much talk will follow—the same as always, while the country withers for lack of circulation. However, all in all, I say it is not an economic problem. To me, it is a spiritual unfoldment."

Subtly telling a story on himself, Alfred said: "I know a professional man who was out of work and applied for the only other thing he could do: drive a car. He thought he had landed. But imagine, they demanded a bond!"

"I understand," the Signor said without sympathy. "The individual case is hard to parallel against the whole. If one attempts it, he is scorned as a theorist. And yet that is just what we all have to do: theorize out. If we can take it . . . "

"You can't take it!" the parrot shrieked.

Alfred laughed. "Uncanny bird!" He shook his head. "Each time it has squawked a potent truth."

"The potency of slang," Anna consoled.

A telephone bell rang. The teacher excused himself to enter his bedroom. A moment later he was back, standing with his arms akimbo.

"For you, Miss Anna Hall," he announced like a butler, to make her smile.

"Is this a joke, Signor? No one in all the world knows of my presence here."

"Perhaps I should say nothing and make you a gamble, yes? You forgot one person." He wagged his finger humorously. "My friend Harold Lock!"

Anna stood amazed, unable to reply.

"He said it was important that he know your address, so I told him you were still here. Perhaps I erred."

Mired in mental confusion, Anna blurted out: "Of all things!" and hurried into the adjoining room.

"I have lots of time now," the *maestro* fibbed to Alfred. "Do drop in and see me often. Make it real soon," he urged.

In the throes of trying to express his true appreciation, Alfred heard Anna calling to him. He entered the bedroom to find her waiting, cupping the telephone transmitter with her hand.

"It's Harold Lock," she explained quickly. "He's extending an invitation. Sunday. A swimming party at his home in Beverly Hills. Imagine? Suggests that I bring you."

Fright filled her eyes.

"Alfred!" she gasped. "Surely you're going to give things another try. Say that you will? I must hear you say it!"

Unable to interpret his attitude, she sputtered on rapidly; and when words seemed to fail, she tried to persuade with her eyes.

"It's not pride, sweet girl," he explained. "I suppose I haven't any left."

"Then allow me to do as I suggested in the garden: divide the money."

Reading his conflict with reason, she took the initiative.

"Yes, Mr. Lock," she answered over the telephone, "Mr. Garey says he will be glad to accompany me on Sunday. Thanks so much for thinking of us."

She rose impulsively, supposition surging through her. Unexpected depths of thought opened a door that she felt sure had been closed forever. Instead of rooting up life, she felt a new desire to explore it.

"Sunday at three," she murmured. "Can fate be taking a hand? I'm going to ask Signor."

Quite as interested, he followed her exit.

"*Maestro,*" Anna demanded, "do you believe in fate?"

"That depends. If you do nothing with your life, then something we call fate does drastic things for and to you. Idle drifters find quite late that they should have assumed control of their lives. We either row up stream or drift down. This is a world of action."

He saw a quicksilver mobility of expression change and rechange her lovely features.

"Speak up, Anna. Don't be afraid."

"But Signor, everything has been so frightening lately."

"Ah! If we discuss fear, we might prate until dawn and get nowhere. I learn from a bird again—an ostrich in this case—it buries its head in the sand, and human beings think that very foolish, capturing it in that position. Isn't man just as silly when he buries his intelligence in fear, being captured by falsity? I recall something by Mark Twain: 'I am an old man and have had many troubles, most of which never happened'."

Anna winked both eyes at him.

"I won't say *thanks,*" she trilled. "Signor, I hope our lingering is proof of our gratitude."

"Don't go. Have a glass of wine with me after

all our heavy thinking." Coyly he rubbed his stomach. "I will syphon something special. It will only take a minute or two," he vouched, and darted out of the room. From the hall he shouted: "And Anna knows that my wine is fit to be drunk 'supernaculum'."

Anna shot across the room enthusiastically. "I don't think it would be wrong of me to allow you to glance at a folio he keeps."

From numerous opera scores, she lifted a quire of parchment-like paper and held it briefly so Alfred could read "Manna" inscribed in antique lettering.

"Lovely cover?" she complimented. "Hand-tooled! An Italian artisan presented him with it."

"What did you say it contained, Anna?"

"It's an anthology. A commentary, I suppose I should call it. On anything pertaining to life and what he thinks makes it tick. He writes in it daily."

She rested the album upon the piano and thumbed its pages hurriedly.

"And now, Mr. Alfred Garey," she threatened, with her hand resting on a page well filled with entries, "just tell me which you think you are? And so that you won't be mistaken, I'll read: 'Some people seem to be material beings with a mind, others, mental beings with a body.' His comment below: 'A slow transition must be in progress in us all'."

Alfred smiled, hoping it might sink in later.

They both leaned over to inspect the page which was speckled like marble with private hieroglyphics.

"Oh, Alfred, wouldn't you just love to spend hours with such a book? Would you care to come here again with me?"

Deep in a wide area of thought, his head shook affirmatively. All he had heard and read bore out his own conviction that there was much falsity in the performance of life; that some day the human play would end. Everyone would take off his make-up and costume. God would call another rehearsal.

From the depths of a cellar, a baritone voice began a barcarole, chanting *vino* like a street singer. After an operatic crescendo, Signor Florenzo appeared in the doorway, balancing a tray of glasses. "*Ben-trovato!*" he assured, shedding an infectious smile.

"*Maestro,*" Anna implored, "may I bring Mr. Garey soon again to look at your album of thoughts? We peeked a bit just now."

The Italian blushed.

"It is nothing," he stated modestly. "After I jot a thought down, I discover that someone else has said it—Plato, Swendenborg, Schopenhauer, or one of our very modern minds."

"That's not true, Signor!" Anna complimented.

"Yes, it is: 'There is no new thing under the sun'," he quoted. "I credited Shakespeare with that until I had read the Bible a few times."

"Under it, yes; but there may be plenty to discover above the sun," Anna returned.

"Why, Anna Hall! I shall remember that you said that."

The Italian lifted his glass, poised as if ready to deliver a toast.

"This is a glorious age," he assured. "Not until this decade has man attempted to break the material link. Wireless and radio should inspire us into mental growth, to say nothing of other luxurious inventions. You know what hardships artists have endured that their work might see the light of day. Then, as artists, let us hail and appreciate our fellows in other walks.

"Man has been struggling with a material life for over five thousand years. His first possessions were a club and a skin. Each successive period of history has shown progress more humane and elevating. Are we so blind as to think that this progress is not leading somewhere? In all creation, nothing is standing still.

"We are now entering in a new age. All prophesy points to it, especially Pyramid prophesy which has never been wrong. Sick of an infantile existence, everyone is crying 'New deal,' eager to graduate into something substantially finer; yet what has already arrived is beyond many—has come

faster than some mentalities can accept or even sense.

"In this *New day,* the mental age, scoffers will remain behind, sneering as they always have at any new idea. However, they will be herded on like obstinate cattle.

"Your own mind in this 'New Dispensation' will be your savior in securing your proper place and supply. Do not fool yourselves: in India and other parts of the world, some are manifesting their needs and desires through visualization—against which there is but one law: Does it harm anyone, including yourself?

"All you needs must do when feeling that you no longer belong in this world, is to reflect upon how little you have contributed to it. The thought will sustain you. And remember, while we are on the subject, that success is: becoming so proficient in one or more lines of endeavor, that the quality you generate rebounds to the benefit of others. Now I drink to your exit from this planet—after accomplishment!"

No wine was ever drunk more seriously.

The instructor moved out onto the veranda with his guests, and indulged in miniature calisthenics. While the cool air fanned their faces, each stood momentarily absorbed in his thought world.

The philosopher pulled at the neck of his robe, and thought of obstinate human nature. Alfred

fumbled for a cigarette he knew he did not possess, and thought of breakfast. Anna shuddered briefly, and thought of Sunday.

"Don't go away sore!" was fulminated from the corner in the studio. "Say good-by to Polly. Say something chipper. Ha, ha, ha! Scrub that deck, sailor! Poor Polly's seasick."

Alfred chuckled. "Since that's the only time you didn't rib us, Polly, I'll say farewell to you."

Sensing that the Signor desired a private word with Anna, Alfred swung over to the screen door and watched the colorful bird smooth its contour feathers for the night. When he heard Anna mumble: "I promise," Alfred turned to grasp the Italian's hand.

"Good-night, children," the Signor said as they descended the steps. "Try and remember that life does not begin at forty, or at 8:40 as the humorist insists. Life begins with every heart throb."

On the way out of the garden, gratitude prompted the actors to glance back toward the fascinating sanctuary of peace. They saw the philosopher standing deep in thought, silhouetted by the porch light, appearing as stately as a painting on leaded glass.

CHAPTER VII

THE NIGHT took on a fantastic hue to Anna. The philosopher's words vibrated in her mind like sweet music; and the silent symphony accompanied *Hope* while she danced again with verve. Possessing a salubrious, immune-from-anything sort of feeling, it took the illumination of Hollywood Boulevard to dim the shining vista of her dream and usher in the practical.

"Here's a pretty problem, Alfred," she confided, looking up and down the street. "We don't dare cash this check that George Sinzel gave me at either of our hotels."

"Right. At least not at mine."

"Where may we go at such an hour?"

"Roosevelt Hotel."

They turned westward.

"I was ready to say that I know both cashiers there," with irony, he informed, "but I suppose I should say: they knew me *when*. When is right! When I first landed in this lousy town, stopping there with the same hope that must stimulate those

myriad contest-winners who hie to the Coast so enthusiastically each year."

"You're a bad boy. The word *lousy* may be expressive, but it hardly becomes you."

"Thanks for your criticism. I'll dress it up with a French pronunciation."

"And just how might that sound?"

"Le-o-za. The accent is on the *le*."

"You're *fou!* And the accent is on the *you*."

Anna sensed a seriousness as they progressed. When her companion was mute for too long, she turned ready to ask his thoughts, just as he began voicing them freely.

"This philosopher friend of yours is certainly impressive," he assured. "It would be strange, now wouldn't it, if people stopped using money? You see, George Stinzel had one theory and the Signor another. Oh, there's bound to be some alteration in the monetary system. Stinzel blamed tax, and your teacher the stock market. Gambling, greed, I mean."

"Yes, I remember."

"The Signor's statement about pyramid prophesy indicating a change in the near future was inspiring. Perhaps brain will at last get its just reward, instead of cunningness. Well, if talk will do any good, he's a gold mine. You were right about him. He's a wonderful soul. I wonder if he does this to everyone who calls on him? Here's a typewritten

message he slipped into my pocket as we were leaving. Let's see what it says."

He led Anna under a lamp post. Their heads went together while they read:

Within thyself there lies some latent power
As potent as has ever come to light
But which awaits the coming hour
When thou shalt set it free before man's sight.

A significant glance was exchanged, then they stood gazing down *Heartache* Boulevard, quite unconscious of its mocking stridency; for each, in his heart, was formulating a firm resolve to part the veil of time, never again to merely exist by the fluttering pages of a calendar. The scowl of the night had vanished. Protracted inner nervousness gave way to mental stolidity. Momentarily, the sage had been victorious against Lucifer.

Hardly aware of it, they moved onward, propelled by the invisible wings of anticipation, in peaceful, ruminative silence. Anna's peace of mind was ephemeral. Suddenly, compelled by a paralyzing thought, she stopped in her tracks, leaving an elucidative sentence hanging in mid-air.

"What is it, Anna? Don't prolong the agony."

"I've just had what you might call the convulsions of the budget. The monetary system has already changed."

"Stop the riddles. What can be so tragic?"

"Ug!" she grunted. "This George Stinzel check. What if it's no good? What if it's rubber and bounces?"

"That's too far distant to annoy. You pray for a feeble-minded cashier at the Roosevelt. And while I'm convincing him that the weather is just swell, you shoot him with a few of your angelic smiles."

Too preoccupied to receive the compliment, Anna pleaded: "Oh, let's hurry! I can't stand the suspense. If the check is lead then I drop with it."

They increased their stride furiously. Anna lifted her skirts to aid the speedy pace. Passers-by turned to cast curious eyes upon such athletic tendencies.

"It all proves . . . "

"Ah-ah! Don't begin that," Anna interrupted, catching her breath. "It proves I'm confused; and I don't mean the Eddie O'Donnel interpretation."

They stepped off the curbing to cut diagonally across the street. Lifting a beggarly palm up toward the hotel building, Alfred sang jitteringly, with false mirth:

"Brother, have you got a dime?"

"Woe is me, Alfred! Now's the time to say something for luck, and all I can think of is horseshoes."

With forced levity, he assured: "Not the kind of shoes that baby needs, but it's okay. It's a metallic thought."

They passed the hotel portals and walked down an aisle of thick carpet with pneumatic tread in rheumatic suspense. Shortly they emerged without rheumatism.

Anna beamed. Alfred wore the smile of a swain on leaving a *risqué* sideshow. They hurried away, like urchins shuffling to an alley with a stolen wallet.

Abreast the El Capitan Theatre, Anna whispered: "You're being taken for a walk, Mr. Garey."

Playfully imitating a gangster, she cruised him into the dark recesses of the lobby; and, after countnig her money twice, extended half to him with the gesture of a schoolgirl presenting an excellent report card to a doubtful parent.

Her unselfish action gave Alfred a lump in his throat. As welcome as the gift was, he could not refrain from enjoying the brief moment before acceptance.

An exceptional girl, he thought. And an exceptional night, the like of which few could record in a mental diary. While studying her upturned face in the intermittant light flashes from the street, one thing worried him: this human orchid did not quicken his pulse in the least. He decried it, hating to think himself already dead. However, this was true: by her side he had forgotten himself; had experienced more surprising, happy moments than

he had known in months. Perhaps, after all, this was romance.

His inertness suggested masculine pride to Anna. "Goin' tuh town!" she cried like a dice shooter, blew her breath on the fist containing the money and indulged in antics to distract him.

"Somehow," he began his aversion, "I have always felt that a man who took money from a woman was a . . . "

Her finger tips went quickly over his lips while she slipped the money into his coat pocket. To infect him with her spirit, she clasped his hand, whirling him about, playing crack-the-whip. They reached the sidewalk with the speed of ballet dancers and paused to watch workmen testing a huge electric-display sign on Grauman's Chinese Theatre across the way.

"Um! Big premier opening Sunday," Anna indicated.

"Boy, what big letters. Think you'd like to see your name in lights that size, Anna?"

"Of course, silly. That's worse than asking a gambler if he likes to win."

They stood as meditatively absorbed as children watching billposters heralding an incoming circus.

"I tried the psychology of visualiation once in that regard," Anna confided. "I concentrated every night and morning for weeks and weeks."

"And it didn't work?"

"It sure did! After a fashion."

"Don't stop there. Give."

"Well, what happened is a laugh. It is now; it wasn't then. I had just finished a picture for Angison. We drove down to Compton to preview it *on the sneak.* About a block from the theatre, I saw Anna Hall blinking at me in blue and white incandescents."

"That's something. Where's the catch to it?"

"But it didn't come through merit. A Mr. Adolph Kaliz—banker and financial backer for Angison—arranged the surprise in an attempt to please me. I didn't please him, 'cause he didn't please me, and nobody's been pleased since."

Cankering resentment forced her on maliciously.

"He's a persistent mess. I think he got my name placed on the Hollywood Black Book. I'm sure the heel is responsible for my option not being . . ."

She paused apruptly to disentangle her rising hate.

"It's a long story. Let's not have it. I was wrong about George Stinzel, so I'd better forget it."

"Right! Don't get *that way* after shaking the malady out of me. What does it matter? It's all a lot of foolish conglomera . . . "

"Conglomera!" she interrupted like an adolescent. "Speaking of conglomera," she said foolishly, "let's have some chop suey. We're rich! Not in months have I had any."

With emphasis far too stern, he punctured her whimsical balloon with a short speech on thrift.

"My-my! You missed your calling. You're an orator. You should have been an attorney."

A nervous fumbling in his pocket indicated a desire of his own.

"Little man, what now?" she jested.

"But, if it please the court," he began hopefully, "do cigarettes come under the heading of extravagance?"

"Oh, yes, Alfred. I mean *no.* The budget will simply have to bend to those. Can't remember when I had one last. Yes, indeed, we've just got to smoke out those facts!"

"Then as your broker," he clowned, "I can advise the investment, without serious jeopardy to your principal. While on the other hand, everyone knows that chop suey is stock that is very speculative, and due for a decline."

"You're crazy!"

"Madame, you're right. The habit must have me." He pointed to a drug store at far-away Vine Street. "And now's the time that we'll have to walk that mile they've mentioned so often. Let's get going!"

They broke into a fast walk. In an effort to outdo each other, they leaned forward with lengthy strides. Shortly Anna gasped for breath, left the race, and leaned against a building to relax.

The street lamps gave a little jumping in-and-out flare and died. The dim circuit came on peculiarly enough to prompt laughter. Increasingly infectious, the false gayety continued idiotically. Shortly they were acting as people so often do when laughter lacks reason.

Holding her sides, Anna exclaimed: "Oh, this silliness is killing me!"

Alfred was happy because he no longer thought of his unhappiness. To him, the night had passed outside the realm of time. Anna's laughter subsided into choked snickers, then coughing began.

"I'll stop that," he assured. "Give me your wrists."

He lifted her arms over her head and down with decided rhythm. She shunned his eyes; but quite suddenly from her throat came a faint sound like the tuning gurgle of a flute.

"So, it's a Spring Dance," she sibilated.

"Right! And I'm the gigolo." Quickly sensing that the remark did not set well, he attempted to counter-act her resentment. "Let's play window-glance. Ever do it when you where a kid? It's crazy fun."

"What's it like?"

He took her arm.

"Get ready now. We pass this shop window as fast as you can walk. You are to enumerate everything your eyes photograph in one glance with one long breath."

Half-running, he rushed her by a jewelry store.

"Clocks, clocks, bracelets, bracelets. Pfff!" In a spasmodic fit, she cried: "I'm winded!"

"Try again; then we'll make it a contest."

Shop after shop made Anna very proficient. Attempting to startle her, and to test her conjectural powers, Alfred stopped breathlessly in front of a fruit stand.

"Lemmie have it! Quick now! So you won't talk, eh!" he thundered like a traffic officer. "How many apples in that pile?"

The Japanese attendant stood motionless, certain that he was being arrested by some plain-clothes detectives. But his narrow eyes widened when he saw the couple leave his stand as hurriedly as they had approached it. Were not all Americans just a little mad?

"Now we'll play observation," Alfred announced.

Away they shuffled in a fast walk, like children on vacation. The actual possession of a few dollars rendered them giddy. Their eyes missed nothing. They laughed and guffawed at anything, at everything, with inordinate freedom.

Pointing to a cube of ice melting in a restaurant doorway, Anna snickered and played three jumps of

hopscotch on the geometric water streaks gravitating to the gutter.

On passing over an iron grating, each said "Ah!" one after the other, accepting the sweet smell of cinnamon rising from a bakery. Crossing another, caused them to hold their noses while they pronounced a nasal-twanged "Oo!"

An *A* sign on the sidewalk, reading: *Bankers Handle Your Money Best,* produced an ironical laugh. Alfred noticed that dogs had also shown great disrespect for the sign of advice, but did not mention it.

A fat woman was seen through heavy plate glass. While she pushed a wet mop across mosaic tile, she swished her furled skirts at a cat to keep it from tracking the floor.

Sensuous laughter rang out rich and full from an upstairs dance hall. The blare of hot trumpets subsided to allow a megaphone singer to increase his brazen perpetration.

"Follow the leader!" Anna demanded.

She led Alfred into the dark corridor of a five-and-ten store, forcing him to climb over a chain securing a penny-in-the-slot scale to the building. On emerging, she sputtered:

"Lookit the nutty soldier!"

A downstairs cafe entrance was guarded by an upstairs uniformed Russian with sagging hips.

"Quick! What's in there?" Alfred challenged.

". . . a cat in the window, and three drunks," Anna finished her hurried description of a motley scene in a poolroom. Out of breath, through a giggle, she added: "And some men can't spit straight."

A messenger boy shot out of a telegraph office. He straddled his bicycle and counted his envelopes.

"Seven!" Anna challenged in return, and in her exalted state, breathed a prayer for the recipients.

"And a drug store!" Alfred aspirated in relief.

They entered as if on an emergency errand and made an exit like maniacs, tearing cellophane from small packages. While crossing the street, Alfred tried to light his cigarette from Anna's for luck; but a bottle-clinking milk truck brushed too close for comfort. Pell-mell, they scrambled to the opposite curbing. The scornful face of the ewe-necked driver faded into the night, yet his oaths of advice continued until drowned by mechanical rumble.

"What an odd change a few hours can make," Anna testified as they walked along. "If that fusilade of oaths had been yelled at me yesterday, or earlier this evening, it would have absolutely wilted me."

"That proves something."

Expecting pedantry, she said: "There you go again!" and asked: "What?" with a humorous inflection.

"It proves that that dairyman had no milk of human kindness."

"Pish!" she hissed and thought up an answer. "It should prove to be a cigarette testimonial. How's this: 'Good tobacco keeps your nerves from jumping at a milkman'?"

They turned into a street where ghastly white light-flashes attracted them. The couchant position of a man welding a street-car rail appeared hideous in cap and heavy goggles, suggesting a culprit in a colorful lithograph, setting the fuse to an infernal machine.

After passing, the powerful rays sent the reflections of their bodies far down the sidewalk to resemble colossal automata. They had fun attempting to step upon the elongated shadows of their legs.

"I'm the engine; you're the caboose," Anna insisted, jumping in front of Alfred, puffing smoke furiously.

He placed his hands upon her shoulders, indulging her. With choo-choo phonetics, they scraped their feet along the pavement like youngsters playing train.

"Last stop," Anna announced. "Our train is at its destination." Relaxing, she assured: "And what a train of events this night has revealed. Toot-toot!" she intoned too loudly, tittered, got smoke in her throat and began coughing.

Alfred attempted to relieve her.

"Say," he jeered. "I seem to be chief back-patter tonight. Just what do you do when you choke with no one about?"

"Didn't you ever pat yourself on the back?"

Scoffing at her persiflage, he turned his attention to the hotel building, then struck a poetic pose.

"So these are the walls which have barricaded you during the long period of my desire. Swell Romeo speech?"

"Nice; but I believe Romeo spoke in the present."

A weighty frown covered the masculine face.

"Right," he admitted slowly. "Most everything I utter seems to refer to the past."

Anna leaned in with a don't-be-that-way expression and winked both eyes at him. He saw the gleam of tiny spots the faint light placed in them, felt the warmth of her vibrant voice and sensed a change in her which left him wordless for a moment or two.

"La Rosa," he read aloud on the cornerstone of the building. "Quite an appropriate name for your abode, Anna. Much swankier than where I live. I'm around the next corner, down a block, at a place called: *La Pajaros.* It seems to mean *The Birds* in Spanish. If the landlord likes my oration well enough to allow me to stay, why, I'm one of the birds there."

Harsh memory shot him quickly back to the scene when he had been locked out before. In-

delibly imprinted upon his mind was the strange feeling he experienced when his key would no longer fit a lock changed in his absence.

"Alfred!" Anna startled him. "I've been watching you. What have you been thinking? You must tell. Remember, it was you who said that this night should hold no secrets?"

He stammered evasively, but finished truthfully enough to appease her.

"I was thinking of Henry Mun."

Having just thought of the Mun house as a possible port in an anticipated storm, he could not refrain from defending that man's party from further criticism. To Anna's approbation, charity compelled:

"No, no. That gang was all right. You know, just letting loose a little, forgetting themselves, so they could start all over again tomorrow and attack their problems with more freedom. I presume that I was subconsciously thinking of what Signor Florenzo expressed so ably, he quoted: " 'There's a destiny that makes us all brothers and sisters: none goes his way alone.' "

Before she could reply, he lifted both her hands to his lips and gazed a message of thanks into her eyes. Then he mumbled a hurried farewell and slipped away into the night.

Shocked by the strangeness of his tones, Anna stood inert, experiencing a tingling sensation, the

wave of sickness one feels after crying a last *Bon voyage* to a dear friend at a pier.

Alfred turned about at that moment, as if she had cried out to him, and waved a cavalier gesture. Poor boy, she sympathized, he's just like a knight of old moving on to battle. Yet, she corrected, he was no Sir Galahad, riding in full armor toward the foe. Alfred had no panoply at all. He was walking, weaponless, right up to the lion's mouth.

A shudder caused her to think of her own plight, and she hurried in across the lobby to the elevator. As it clicked at the seventh floor, faint barks of welcome came from room 718.

"Lovie," Anna said in a loud whisper, "mama's back. And, sweetie pie, mama brought home the bacon!"

When her key did not seem to fit in the lock, her bosom heaved and her pulse commenced to pound. The barking dog within increased her nervousness as she twisted and turned the key to no avail with numb, awkward fingers. An icy reaction sapped her strength. Her body sagged against the casing. Muffled sobs echoed in the hall.

Then she gasped.

The key turned. The lock responded. The door swung. Her knees weakened and she sank to the floor with an exultant surge to shower her emotion gratefully upon the dog.

Confined too long for immediate hugging, the

Pekingese scuttled away to bark her disapproval, then mollified its warlike declaration by presenting an ostentatious figure-eight race around the bed post into the bathroom.

"You darling!" Anna shouted ecstatically.

Skinning off her dress, she took a full-length dive to the bed, covered her head with the counterpane, and yelled for the antics of a homely bout:

"Bed-and-scramble, Ginger! Bed-and-scramble!"

The happy Pekingese bounded up beside her to wrestle furiously with its mistress' feet, rising mountain-like under the thin covering.

Anna's physical action to attract the dog, paralleled the speed of her mental planning. As she speculated upon the future, her heart throbbed hard, propelling the imaginary bark through oceans of thought that moulded a possible career. Recalling George Stinzel's statement concerning the non-refillable bottle of life, she connected it with the philosopher's advice on destiny and pledged herself to fill that bottle with nothing but precious beauty. Lifelong desires presented themselves not only possible but seemingly within her grasp; and in this transient enchantment, were undulated to her on wave after wave of success.

And finally, when she had reasoned it all out to her satisfaction, her quivering lips parted to emit a terse petition ceilingward; then she buried her face in the pillow and wept with a brand new emotion.

CHAPTER VIII

THE MORNING sun found a crack in the drawn curtains of Anna's room. It crossed the floor, mounted the bed, and placed a halo over her fair head. Her eyes opened as if to receive its blessing, but a forty-wink decision caused her to turn toward the wall.

The little Pekingese, on the foot of the bed, sensed the household dawn, scratched its tiny self, and scuttled playfully up to the pillow where it placed a damp tongue of affection upon the chin of its drowsy mistress.

"No, no, Ginger," Anna mumbled in a half-dream. "You tickle! Mama sleep."

Anna sneezed from the effects of the bewhiskered kiss. The dog answered with a "Woof!" which drove Morpheus from the room.

Weakly submissive, Anna rose to an elbow in order to stroke the silken head. Her blinking eyes restored familiar objects to their proper places; then, with a jerk, she lifted the mattress and

fumbled for her purse. The night's fortune was not a dream. She was no longer the Niobe of other mornings. Her tears were in the past.

"Breakfast money, Ginger!" she cried, jostling the loving dog about.

A recapitulation of her needs ended in a firm decision that the hotel manager should not participate. Her money must go for nothing but culinary necessities until more luck appeared upon the financial horizon.

But what to say when the executive placed his usual morning telephone call was quite another problem. The truth had sustained past explanations. Now she would have to conjure up a lie in order to keep her scanty sum intact.

In this concentrated state, she could hear the manager's rantings. First, he would demand that her rent be paid by noon—then part—then insist upon some sort of payment; after which, he would artfully employ a weighty pause that invariably proceeded:

"Very well, Miss Hall, just when may I expect to receive a substantial sum. I might say in explanation that I do not own the hotel. I try to run it. And *profitably* is the word."

The anticipation of his crisp voice was sufficient torture; but after the expletive conversation was ended, the aftermath would saturate her, that horrible descending feeling, with accompanying

chill, which left her expended, quivering like an invalid.

A shudder ended in a rebound out of bed. Wrapping her shell-like body in a pale-green negligee, she began pacing the floor. In an effort to assimilate at least part of Signor Florenzo's philosophy, she began showering the manager with loving thoughts; and, to help maintain them, ran to the window and threw the curtains wide to bask in the beauty that the new day presented.

Two tall palm trees, beneath her window, bent their tipknots in a light breeze, nodding a salutation; and a tropical vine, winding up their conical trunks, lent color to the greeting with dainty, purple petals.

Intuitively Anna's gaze turned to the west.

Beverly Hills, dotted fantastically with exquisite homes, trees, flowers, was patterned with gray roads circling here and there to almost meet again. The multicolor of the contour blended the area together in a mound of layers, as impressive as a birthday cake, the window display of a French chef's ambitious creation.

With a song in her heart, Anna wondered which mansion belonged to Harold Lock.

Rows of towering palm marked the declivity from the Doheny estate, standing like sentinels guarding the whole valley. Sentinels indeed, remaining at their post of duty for years upon years,

monuments to the assiduity of the Franciscan monks.

Flanking them was Wilshire Boulevard, curving in from the Pacific Ocean at Santa Monica, winding eastward to down-town Los Angeles.

Wilshire, Anna pondered consolingly: his life had as many ups and downs, and infinitely more twists and turns than the boulevard perpetuating his name.

The electric shock of a shrill telephone bell broke her pleasant reverie. The relaxed state of mind had left an open door for fear. What to say? How to answer those torcherous declamations that would be hurled from the desk? Her hands wrung frantically. The specious collector would be as disgusted at reiteration as she. After several deep breaths, Anna lifted the receiver and used her sweetest tones.

"Good-morning! And what a glorious morning it is," she rushed on in a hectic filibuster. "What glorious sunshine! Why, from my window I can see . . ."

Shocked at not hearing the expected voice, she was immediately cognizant of one equally distasteful. Artfully she parried with the *sotto voce,* attempting to be playfully mysterious with her; and, like Penelope, wove a funeral pall, yet with hateful thoughts which she did not intend to unravel.

"Yes, yes," she informed the mystic one, "I know who it is . . . I assure you that I do."

She thumbed her mental nose at him.

"Certainly . . . yes, yes, it's Mr. Adolph Kaliz—in person—not a motion picture."

Instantly she regretted her flippancy, realizing too late that his ego would coddle him into misunderstanding sarcasm for levity.

"Lovely lady, give me a break?" rang disgustingly in her ear.

Cross-currents of bitterness were inchoate in Anna's brain. Visualizing his repugnant face caused foul thoughts to pile themselves like missiles for verbal hurling. But a diplomatic generalissimo appeared on the scene and locked the arsenal, forcing her to interweave her antipathy silently to conceal its pattern.

"Yes, I hear you, Mr. Kaliz. . . . *You dirty rat!* . . . No, I'm not in bed. . . . *Clammy, prurient beast!* . . . Very sorry, but I have a luncheon engagement. . . . *Rather starve than lunch with you!* . . . But that's not true. . . . I think I shall go to the Brown Derby. . . . *Moneyed devil if there ever was one.* . . . I must run now and dress."

"Then I'll probably see you at the Derby?"

"Probably. . . . *Not if I see you first.* . . . Nice of you."

"By-by, Gorgeous!"

"Good-by."

Composure was retained until the receiver was

replaced, then she paced the floor, shouting her distaste at the walls.

The astonished Pekingese brought up the rear, got left in the shuffle, and felt grateful when its mistress sank exhaustedly into a chair.

"Ginger!" Anna stormed with an upturned finger. "That's the man, the snake in the grass who bit the hand that feeds you! He's the chaser who got me on the list of the out-and-outs. And so help me, I hope the dirty lousy bum gets . . . "

An enraged hound on leash could not have calmed more quickly to a master's jerk. The eleventh-hour money from George Stinzel made her refrain from cursing anyone. A gong of clemency had sounded in favor of Adolph Kaliz. Like a great bell, "Hate is the cross on which mankind is crucified," vibrated again and again. Accepting the stern rebuke, she closed her eyes and counted up to ten several times, audibly, to fumigate her mind.

The old admonition of counting, during the heat of hate, had its reward. When her eyes opened, the Pekingese was erect, poised in its most dignified sitting-up position. With one ear cocked for rules, and a laughing mouth of anticipation, the toy assumed that its mistress was ready to play some new game. Waving its feather-duster tail, it waited patiently for the fun to begin, certain that it would all end in a romp far more exciting than the game of shake-the-worn-out-nighty.

Anna melted, all resentment gone.

"Aw, Ginger! Mamma wasn't playing. Mama just forgot to be a philosopher. But I will romp with you—and how!"

Anna gave a quick lateral jump, dilated her eyes, and waited. The toy gave a quick lateral jump, dilated its eyes, and waited.

After an athletic pause, everyone ran.

The dog started a marathon figure-eight race into the bathroom. Anna took a running, jumping dive to the bed and covered her head with the spread.

"Bed-and-scramble!" she cried.

The emotional riot was ephemeral, cut short by an ominous telephone bell. Entirely prepared, Anna crossed the room like a martyr to explain the status of her pecuniary affairs with perfect ease.

"Edna!" she murmured happily, and gained strength. "So glad you called. . . . What? Certainly I'm all right. . . . What can you mean by that inflection? Are you . . . Wait a minute? Ginger! Be quiet! Quit barking. Edna, there's a fire engine passing in the street. I can't hear you. The sirens are awful! Wait . . . Now try."

"Say, was I worried about you all night, Anna! I'm telling you. You'll just never know. Couldn't get you out of my mind. Couldn't get you on the telephone, either, which made my imagination run amuck. Gosh, you must have been out late! All your talk about—you know what—startled me be-

yond words. And this morning, when I heard the newsboys shouting *Suicide extra* in the street, well, I nearly lost my mind until I read who it was. The papers are just full of it; and how terrible, since we knew him so well!"

Anna wavered, feeling herself in a vacuum. She struggled for vocal reply and finally managed to ask: "Who?" through parchment lips.

" . . . read—tragedy—morning—headlines . . . "

"Edna, wait! I can't hear but every other word. There's another fire-engine siren screaming. This suspense is killing me! I'll get a newspaper, then call you right back."

Ages seemed to pass while her trembling fingers jiggled the transmitter lever in an effort to obtain the desk. During the awful waiting for the bell boy, a fiend kept connecting Alfred Garey with the tragedy while her whole being argued vehemently against it. Weakly she dropped to the bed and checked and rechecked her list of acquaintances, searching for anyone who she thought might succumb to self-destruction. But the wide circle of her reasoning began and ended with Alfred.

Beginning at their coincidental meeting under the palm tree, she traced every word and action until he had bid farewell at her door. Eagerly she passed over every suspicion. This was the starting of a friendship so promising. Could it be that their

lives swung side by side like pendulums but for a day, one to shoot into eternity the next? A possible answer in the affirmative caused her heart to pound rebelliously.

Footfalls in the hallway stopped the mental inquest; and when the servant's knock came, it seemed to waft her spirit away. Throatily, she mumbled:

"Come in."

The door swung, revealing a gawky boy who stopped in his tracks to gape at the lovely figure in pale green upon the bed.

"Place the newspaper on the chair," Anna directed, as if ill. "Come back in ten minutes for your tip. I'll have it ready then."

The boy slammed the door sullenly, and dragged listless feet along the hallway, thinking of cantankerous females and munificent men.

After a single glance at the headline, Anna grasped the telephone to place a call for Alfred Garey. Her body went limp as a rag when she heard his voice.

"Oh, how terrible, Alfred? Isn't it awful? What do you make of such news? It's another tragedy for the business, isn't it? I can't seem . . . What? You haven't heard either? Edna Allar just telephoned me, or I wouldn't have known. . . . Well, I *am* telling you. It was that poor, dear George Stinzel. He committed suicide!"

She stuttered on with regretful statements. Her eyes welled with tears and her voice cracked.

"Dear me, Alfred, I just can't believe it. The headlines in the paper are enough to cause a person to weep for days. Here's one. Listen: 'Movie producer squares accounts and ends life.' Just think back, Alfred. Weren't some of the things he said last night at Henry Mun's very peculiar? Double meanings, I mean, and all that. Oh, I just feel as if . . . "

"Anna! Calm yourself! This agitation will do no good. I have no paper. Will you read me the brief facts?"

"I'll try. Wait until I wipe my eyes. It's got me so weak I'm . . . It says that it happened in his apartment this morning . . . about five-thirty. . . . A gun he used on location in his last picture was used, it says. . . . There were blanks in all other chambers. . . . 'A bullet of his own manufacture' is one of the captions. . . . They probed . . . found it to be a tiny paper weight from his desk. . . . He wadded it into the gun barrel by means of bits of paper. . . . He was only . . . "

She paused, biting her lip savagely.

"Anna! Please."

Silence ensued, as if the line had gone dead.

Perfect understanding told Alfred that it foretold a painful outburst. The anticipation unnerved him. He could feel the little hairs on the back of his neck quiver while he waited, robbed of speech.

Then came the deluge.

"Oh, my God!" Anna groaned. "I'm getting petrified with fright. I can't see to read any more. I don't want to anyway. I can't stand being alone either. Will you please come over?"

"Of course. Happy to. Now, Anna, calm yourself."

She fought off her emotion, and waited before speaking.

"Will you make it quickly, Alfred. I've just got to get out of this room into the sunshine. Will you take me for a walk? Will you hurry?"

"Won't be thirty minutes. I can do it in a lot less time if you insist; but I do need to slide into a barber chair. Will half an hour be okay?"

"No. I mean all right. But hurry! I've got to go somewhere where people are smiling and happy. Any place. Listen, I don't think that it would be, you know what I mean, irreverent if we . . . In a way, it would really be his money that we'd be spending. . . Do you . . . "

"Anna!"

"I know. But Alfred, I must go to some place where it's lively. Will you take me to the Brown Derby for lunch? People smile there—even if they are artificial."

CHAPTER IX

A WALK along the crest of the Hollywood hills in the bright sunshine acted as a panacea. To banish dark thoughts, Anna played the part of a chatterbox, talking incessantly about anything.

"Glorious-looking island?" she indicated.

They paused to focus attention upon Catalina Island, miles distant, whalebacked and culminant, surmounting the Pacific blue.

"Bad luck!" Anna bemoaned. "Wish I had money enough to go there. They say that the water is as blue as the Mediterranean with marvelous submarine gardens which one can see seventy feet below the surface. Fish, too. Now wouldn't you like to find out how fish live?"

"Wonderful!" Alfred mocked. "I'd just love to Winchell the home life of a fish."

"Silly!"

"Madame, didn't you say that I was to try and be funny today?"

"Your memory is correct."

"Very well. No complaints then."

"Right, as you say. Go as far as you like. Well, I'm ready to descend the hill now." Quickly she parried: "How'd you like to McIntyre along the boulevard and get a thought while strolling?"

"Don't fool. I don't have to stroll to get the thought that's bothering me."

"Aw, poor Alfred! He wants his *café au lait*."

"It'll take more than that. I'm starved. Come on, Brown Derby Mademoiselle and make it *tout de suite*."

While they descended, Anna shot studious glances at his cranium.

"Now I know why you look so different," she blurted out at length. "Why, Mr. Garey, a haircut makes you look almost human!"

"Thanks to you," he bowed, "I'm no longer Shakespearian-looking."

She winked both eyes at him.

"You know," he laughed, "running about Hollywood without a haircut has its embarrassing moments. It makes your creditors think that you're tied up in a picture of long duration. And if you go down the main stem without a shave, they're certain that you're working, ask how the picture's coming and want to know its title."

They lolled along as spirited as sight-seers until they reached the boulevard and turned into Vine Street.

"Oh-oh!" Anna exclaimed. "How'd you like to be a celebrity?"

The Brown Derby Restaurant was flanked by a double line of autograph-seekers. Those curious, gregarious people of various age and sex, who are adrift from egoistic moorings and seem content to bask, for fractional moments, in reflected glory.

"Let's wait here and watch, Alfred."

Anna pulled him into an entrance adjoining the building, and they paused to view the arrival of the famous, the elegant, the rich.

A daily noon-hour bivouac it was. With signature books in hand, the collectors poised themselves alert, casting furtive glances about like turkey-gobblers searching for grain, and similarly soniferous. Possessing an enormous perspicuity, they waited in nervous expectation for even a telescopic glimpse of any celebrity.

And when they "saw his chariot but appear," they made "an universal shout" like Romans hailing Caesar, yet with the dangerous appetite of a Cassius; for, as each luxurious town-car rolled elegantly to the curbing to unload stars and famous personages, the espial group, emulous of each other, moved *en masse* in football formation, guarding their goal, until the proffered books were returned inscribed—regardless of toes or clothes.

"I don't know whether it's a racket or a dance." Alfred shook his head. "It seems to be a mania."

As each registrar bowed and smiled his way hopefully into the cafe, the books were covetously blotted, and that conquest forgotten. But the avaricious emotion would generate immediately, become incorrigible, evidencing its morbid state in chary looks and craning necks, quite as rhythmical as a trained chorus, in a tireless search for victims.

"Look, Alfred. That hatless fellow with the yellow hair has no book at all, only a stack of dirty old business cards."

"That's nothing. Some of them want their handkerchiefs autographed. Or their handbags, hats, anything."

"Well, there's nothing funnier than people," Anna diagnosed.

"If you ask me, I'd say that that much effort applied properly would bring fame and fortune instead of just signatures."

"Words of wisdom, Mr. Garey. . . And look at that gray-haired old lady. She has nothing but a pad and a stub of a pencil."

"Aw, that's a gag!"

"How do you mean?"

"The star is supposed to be overcome with pity and hand the tablet back with a nice greenback between the leaves. It's worse than the paper-of-needles gag, with the pity-me puckered lips."

A stately car rolled to the curb.

"Ah, Claudette Colbert," Alfred said admiringly.

Anna stood on tiptoes. "I want to see what she has on."

"She won't have much on if she doesn't sign those books faster. She's liable to become a Nudist."

"Lovely frock," Anna thought aloud.

"I suppose it is a thrill the very first time they run after you for your autograph," he mumbled, thinking he was answering her.

"Oo, ah, ummm," Anna stuttered. "Norma Shearer! Now isn't she gracious to them?"

"It'll be gracious-goodness if she loses a couple of buttons, for souvenirs, from that pretty ermine cape."

"I must get a close-up of that cape in the sunlight. I just must! That's the kind I always wanted."

She tugged at Alfred's sleeve, but he was modestly reluctant.

"Old meanie!" she accused. "Why didn't you hurry?"

Alfred attempted to part the human wall nearest the cafe entrance. With one mind, the gang thought that two celebrities were trying to crash the restaurant unobserved, proclaiming them famous by reason of their attitude.

A breath-taking rush followed, with exceptional pushing and shoving. Instantly separated from Alfred, Anna found herself wedged against the building by two women, and released only when she gave

her name and pleaded indigent of fame. Pulling herself together, she rushed through the glass door and peered out.

Modesty had saved her; but Alfred began accepting the albums. Looking over his shoulder, a boy read the name "Alfred Garey" and snatched his pen away.

"Can't kid my book!" he cried angrily. "I'll use an ink eraser."

A distasteful tirade followed. Amid catcalls and urchin boos, Alfred colored, attempted to formulate an apology, then entered the cafe with the thumping heart of humiliation.

His name having been received so unfavorably on the exterior, he hardly knew whether to mention it in connection with the table he had engaged. When comfortably seated, he met Anna's satirical expression with:

"Unwillingly, I'm furnishing the laughs you wanted."

"Why did you ever start signing his old book?"

"I've done a couple of nice parts since I've been out here. I thought him sincere in wanting my signature."

A playful sarcasm hovered about her lips for utterance. Thinking better of it, Anna scanned the room, looking for the ermine cape.

"Like this table, Anna? It's hand picked."

She nodded with her attention fixed on the door.

The entrance of a Mr. Adolph Kaliz caused her to decide quickly on nose-powdering.

A dark-complexioned stout man of about forty-five, wearing bifocal glasses and a satanic grin stood by the cashier's desk making a careful scrutiny of the many tables.

Anna watched her pursuer's actions from a crack in the door of the lady's lounge. When she saw him leave disappointedly, she joined Alfred again.

"What's the matter, Anna? You look as fussed as I felt a few minutes ago."

"Let's skip it. Do you mind? Perchance do you know Audrey Berkin?" she said to change the subject.

"Slightly."

"She's standing by the door. I think she wants to speak to me and can't make up her mind about intruding. Please go bring her over."

Alfred escorted an embarrassed girl to the table, similar to Anna in features, but rather rustily dressed. She was one of those timid souls who had made a quick decision, instantly regretting it.

"I shouldn't have done this," she apologized. "Interrupting your lunch and *tete-a-tete.*"

"Audrey Berkin, don't be silly! Alfred, do the strong man act: make her sit."

He compelled her gently; and the girl sat demurely, as one indicating a departure while hoping for an invitation to remain.

"I did want to see you a minute, Anna," she confessed, a little frustrated. "I just had to tell you this: this morning, only a few hours after his suicide, mind you, I received a personal check from George Stinzel!" Including Alfred with an emotional shake of the head, she muttered softly: "Can you fathom that? I can't. I can't get over it."

Her listeners exchanged esoteric glances.

"Think of it, Anna! It was for work I did 'way last summer, the last payment for that 'water stuff' when I doubled for you. Fifteen dollars. It's appalling!" Her lips began quivering; her voice sank to a whisper. "Not paying me then, and paying me now, gives me the creeps." She lowered her head and began tearing matches on the table. "So, that's that." She indicated a departure. "That's all I had to say. But it all proves something or other, doesn't it?"

"Audrey Berkin!" Anna exclaimed to lighten the conversation. "Where did you get that expression about proving? Alfred is always using it. Come on, snap out of it. Sit and keep us company a while. We came here to get cheered up, so wouldn't you like to help us shake a mood? Have a squint at some lovely frocks. You'll see celebrities here that you seldom run across, and . . . "

"Right!" Alfred chimed in. "Let's get organized, Audrey, and pan everybody."

He accomplished a weak smile.

"Nice of you both. Thanks. Now that I'm past the door. By the way, Alfred," she smiled a healthier smile, "what were the autographers trying to do to you, crown you Queen of the May? So you wouldn't be Queen?"

"We've decided to skip everything unpleasant," he reminded. "And no long stories."

"Correct," Anna sanctioned. "Only short, funny stories will be accepted by this scenario staff. Now we go. Okay by you, Audrey?"

A rapid change came over the serious girl. Gazing about the room became as stimulating as the first view of a laden Christmas tree.

"Ah, breakfast!" Alfred exclaimed, rubbing his hands together like a miser.

A waiter extended cards and, under drooping lids, fixed disapproving eyes upon the girls for lack of interest in them. His flat feet indicated his annoyance while Alfred read appetizing suggestions to deaf, but not mute females.

"I think that Norma Shearer must be giving a luncheon for Ann Harding," Audrey advanced.

"No," Anna corrected. "It's Kay Francis; and I'll tell you why."

Alfred sighed effectively. "How about interest in who's giving this luncheon?"

There was no response.

"What, no vitamin B complex," he rambled on, "or frog's so-and-so? Or brains?" he insinuated.

"Hepburn with her back to us," Anna informed.

"Then Carole Lombard, isn't it? Say, perhaps Ginger Rogers is giving the luncheon."

"Ladies!" the male groaned. "I'd like to obtain a smile by stating that I don't give a damn who's giving that luncheon. Have—you—had—your—yeast?"

"There's a man for you." Audrey turned disgusted eyes upon him. "Won't allow a couple of girls to gab."

"I don't mind," he lied, "but you girls are hungry. Have your wheaties, then papa will show you the animals."

The entrance of Louella Parsons deferred the order.

A large group were ready to sit at a beflowered table. Guests were searching playfully for place cards along the edge of cool-looking decorations suggestive of brilliant stalagmites, under the reflected lighting.

"Um-m, swell coiffure Myrna Loy has," Anna gushed. "Wonder who her barber is?"

"She must go to Arden. Keen suit, eh?"

"Swell suit. Good lines. Good tailoring. Good taste."

"Good lord!" Alfred lamented.

Suddenly he received an inspiration. Lifting Anna's shapely finger, he placed it upon the menu like a pointer.

"Eggs Florentine!" he said with elation, winked at the waiter and ordered, adding: "Coffee for three."

The man taking the initiative was too much. Audrey wanted no eggs, but would have coffee and cinnamon toast, finally deciding on tea. Anna wanted the order, went into momentary silence, with hand on brow, then announced coffee like an occultist.

Alfred lit a cigarette, blowing the smoke ceilingward with the air of a day's work well done.

"Surely that must be a birthday party," Audrey speculated. "Frederic March hurried in and whispered something to everyone around the table and is now on his way out again. He's got his make-up on. Perhaps he's embarrassed."

A pun from Alfred made Audrey ask saucily: "How come you must crack wise about everything?"

"I promised Anna to be on the jolly ol' up-and-up with glib and radiant cheer. I'm funny man, today. Get it? 'Those way' with mirth. However, I shouldn't think that you'd mind a little silliness. You were pretty low when you arrived."

"You said it!" she admitted casually, and referred charmingly to Frank Borzage's smile.

"He should smile," Alfred stated sincerely. "He just received the prize for the best directed picture

of the year. And it's not the first time he's carried off that honor."

Enthusiastically, Anna said: "There's Mickey Mouse's papa," indicating Walt Disney.

A tourist-looking skinflint with scraggly hair, old-fashioned spectacles, and a bit of broccoli on his chin, leaned over from the next table.

" 'Scuse, I says." He snapped his head in a bow. "But you people seem tuh know ev'body. Cana make inquiry 'bout th' man in that fur corner that's actin' up kinda?"

Restraining herself, Anna contributed to his entertainment. "Jack Oakie is clowning a bit with Sid Grauman and Jimmie Dunn. Jack Benny just left them laughing."

After a pertinent question, about the opposite sex, the man with the hidden chin turned back to his table with a twinkle of rare knowledge in his eyes, sensuously alert.

"Gosh!" Audrey snickered. "Do these tourists eat this place up!"

Alfred ridiculed: "Are you punning, Miss Berkin?" When the girls moved closer together for confidential gossip, he accused: "Ah-ah! No dish-dirting."

Soon he heaved a weighty sigh to attract their attention, and received it.

"This is odd," he began philosophically. "Here we sit gaping at success all about us. I have been

pondering on fame. Do you suppose that our names would sound as euphonious, or would we have to have different vibrations in order to achieve?"

"I never liked my name," Audrey returned. "According to numerology, Josephine would have been better."

Anna patted her arm. "How about Dorothy?"

"Do I look like a *Dot?*"

"You look lovely," Alfred complimented. "You resemble Anna, and I think that's lovely."

"Not in these duds! I was thinking that I might be disgracing your table."

With a second's passing, Audrey realized her *faux pas*. It, however, struck a charitable chord in Anna who pulled her near for a whispered confabulation. Presently Anna announced aloud:

"Audrey thinks she might meet us at Harold Lock's on Sunday."

"Oh-oh!" Alfred said to put her at ease. "I've got a hunch that Audrey could go for Harold in a big way."

"Wrong. I belong to somebody else." Audrey laughed artificially. "Sounds like a song title, doesn't it?"

"Ah, yes, Ben Greve," Anna recalled her infatuation.

"Now you have me. I grieve for Ben. Guess I chiseled you out of that pun, Mr. Alfred Garey."

Alfred eulogized: "And boy what a photographer he is! He'll be getting an award from the Academy for camera work before long. That's my sincere prediction. What's he doing now?"

"Working on an airplane picture. The whole crew hate it. They've been shooting over the ocean at Santa Monica for weeks. They're crazy for the end."

Alfred snapped his fingers under her nose. "Why are you so pensive when we mention his name?"

A soft shade of green faded out of Audrey's eyes and left them a pain-shot blue.

"Now that's a bit of life," the moody girl confessed, got confused, started again, then demanded: "Say, just who brought this up? How about a joke from someone?"

Alfred relieved the tension.

"Got it!" he assured. "Bear with me a moment while I take the B. O. off. I'll have to ivory it to make it float."

Anna shook her head firmly.

"Be yourself! We won't have it if it does float."

"Okay then. Here's a riddle."

The nervous waiter slid up to the table in a hurried frenzy. Amid violent protestations from her, he poured Audrey's tea. Quite embarrassed, he slunk away, leaving her spellbound, glaring at three tea leaves which swam ominously in the cup.

"Don't be silly," Anna coaxed, misunderstanding. "Have it the way you want it. It can be changed in a moment."

"No. It can never be changed!" the superstitious girl gasped in mournful tones. Pathetically, she breathed: "It's too late; and it's horrible!"

"Audrey! You frighten me. Alfred, look at her!"

Color had completely gone out of her face while some invisible power seemed to hold her gaze fixed on the cup. Still in a semi-trance, her hands wrung in jerks.

"Don't, Audrey!" Anna shook her. "Only fools are superstitious."

"I've got to go!" the beset girl mumbled. "I've seen an awful vision. Those tea leaves told a ghastly tale."

As soon as she could detach her gaze from the cup, she darted down an aisle with Alfred hurrying to detain her. Like a wildcat, she turned on him.

"Let me alone!" she cried, then modified her tone, somewhat ashamed. "Try to forgive me," she pleaded, and rushed on toward the exit.

Gossip began at the surrounding tables.

Diffidently, Alfred returned to Anna. In order to avoid the piercing gaze the conspicuous action had caused, the two attempted interest in the food. Successive shudders shook Anna's shoulders, forcing her to talk in relief.

"Now just what do you suppose Audrey thinks she saw through silly tea leaves?"

"Beyond me. One thing is sure: she's causing herself plenty of anguish through superstition. I've never seen such a case."

"I'll say! Seeing her quake got me down."

"Aw, someone's instilled a lot of Voodooism into her. Where's she from?"

"South, I think. What does it matter. It's insane! Is a two-dollar bill, or thirteen dollars unlucky? Do I have to ask twice if you'd accept?"

"Right! If we get kicked out of our hotels, would you mind sleeping on the thirteenth floor? I'll bet the bums in the park could answer that with no qualms. Throwing a hat upon a bed is unlucky only when you have no bed to throw a hat on. God, life's difficult enough without manufacturing things in the objective world to help frighten hell out of one during his peaceful moments!"

"Well, she terrified me; and I guess, in my condition, it didn't take much."

Alfred sneered.

"Suppose something is going to—might happen —will happen, she has no right to lay it to tea leaves. It will probably be more on account of her terrific concentration on the subject. Can't tell me that we shouldn't be made of sterner stuff. That line: 'The valiant never taste of death but once,' has helped me more than anything I can think of.

I certainly refuse to view this world or the next through a cup."

"No more references, Alfred, please. What she did to my lovely luncheon is nobody's business."

"She won't spoil mine. Now watch me. As I stick my fork into the Eggs Florentine, don't go haywire if I scream at finding iron in the spinach."

"Alfred!"

"All right. But that's the same spirit of philosophy your friend the Signor would prescribe. We're compelled to laugh some things off. Perhaps I had better take you to him."

"No. I'm all right. I don't know what vision she could have seen, but I'm not afraid. Just go ahead and be silly. Think of a joke. I'll not protest against one that doesn't float now. And I won't rib you if it's old and has whiskers."

What promised to be a miserable repast was interrupted by a tall individual brushing unsteadily against their table.

"I'm just a mug who needs a friend," a voice announced over their shoulders. "I'm confused!"

Simultaneously the actors exclaimed: "Eddie O'Donnel!" with holiday greetings pervading their tones.

"Move right in," Alfred insisted.

"Yes. We need you," Anna sanctioned.

They accepted Eddie with the joy of children at sight of a playmate their mothers had forbidden.

"Must make us laugh," Alfred curried. "Bet you've got more tales than Boccaccio. How'd Henry's party wind up?"

Aided somewhat by the strong, steady hand of his host, the erratic Eddie got himself seated, while Alfred jabbered on fatuously to prompt the Irish wit.

The idea of Eddie being entertaining became remote. He revealed a pair of red orbs, suggestive of no sleep among other things, looking every inch a profligate. His chin sank against a sunken chest; and his body sagged, seeming thankful for any posture it would naturally assume, which to all appearances, if not aided, would soon become accumbant—but not for feasting.

Conscious of what his friends were thinking, Eddie forced a lame smile which incorporated the satire of self-pity. He was oddly aware that something should be said, and meant to voice it; but sound deserted him when he opened his mouth, leaving him gaping, as useless as a rubber doll bereft of its tin whistle.

"You said it!" Alfred clowned, slapping him upon the shoulder. "Try again, Eddie."

He did try, for some sort of message was lurking in the inners of his thinking apparatus. A message of great weight, vital and important like the mes-

sage to Garcia, was ready for delivery from this soldier of the Boulevard.

With effort, he reached for Alfred's ice water and managed to irrigate himself to the point where its crystal coolness was infusing a little life into his paralyzed body. He screwed one eye closed, the better to gaze his auditors into focus, and recalled:

"Did I say *confused?*"

His host and hostess refuted his assertion.

"You wouldn't fool a pal wouldja!" he contradicted with a birdlike nod and a wink. "As we say in German: Y'all are spoofin' me."

He looked through the narrow slit of one eye like a photographer.

"Yep, you're wrong!" he maintained. "In a jittery sort of way, I feel like nature in the raw, before it gets smokable. Wonder if I ain't what Winchell calls a foam-at-the mouther? Bur-rr!" he growled. "This prehistoric Rye that Henry swore to is futuristic woe; and I ain't gonna be nobody's licker taster no 'mo'."

"You mean you're *low,*" Alfred jested.

"Let me think. I feel worse than a gum-wrapper in the subway," he assured much too loud.

Surrounding diners again cast questioning glances at the mystery table.

Alfred attracted him with black coffee and calmed him with rapid conversation. The coffee produced the desired effect; for Eddie suddenly became as accurate as an adding machine, thrusting a problem upon them for solution.

"Here's the parody for today, folks," he outlined. "Paul Moody rooms with me. That is, I've been helpin' 'im over the rough places—an' lately they've been plenty rough. Good actor, an' all that; but no breaks. No good as a roommate, either, 'cause he's as moody as his name."

Eddie shook his head and moaned as if he had invented the moan.

"Get this!" he said leaning closer. "The other day Paul gets a fishin' invitation up to Yosemite. An' I urge 'im to go, 'cause he'd been aroun' doin' nothin'. Nothin' but waitin'. I felt sure that the back-to-nature stuff with a fishin' pole would do the trick of givin' 'im a new slant on things. But here's the pay-off!"

His hand hit the table with a loud slap.

"Is this a laugh, or is this a laugh? This mornin' —the first time he's been out of town in a year—a 'phone call comes in from Paramount Studios, an' it's a swell job for 'im!"

Tones of sympathy issued forth from the actors.

"So I'm in a spot," Eddie said fulsomely. "Think of me who just got in, blotto, with my head needin' ice on it! I have to be social with the castin' office, kid 'em along in order to get all the 'info.' So, I finally get organized an' tell 'em that Paul's out for coffee—that I'll leave a note for 'im, an' so

forth. Then I put in a long-distance call to Yosemite, an' bingo—no deal! Can't locate Paul anywhere in the whole valley. . . . Is that a story, or am I crazy!"

His auditors sat motionless.

"Of course!" Eddie thundered. "Fish weren't good enough for 'em up there, the goofs had to go somewhere else, never thinkin' about 'phonin' back where they'd decided on campin'. I've already spent three dollars on calls, an' all I get is to talk to hotel clerks along the line who never heard of 'im. Wow!"

He emphasized his disgust with thumbs down on the table, while his friends began stuttering their ideas on how the truant actor could be brought back to town without the casting office knowing of his absence.

"Edna's car!" Anna suggested.

"He's told you that he can't locate him," Alfred pointed out.

"An' I might add," Eddie advised truthfully, "that Edna shouldn't catch me with this hangover. If she even hears about it, she'll give me a permanent wave."

Thespian understanding flowed between them as they calculated against time. Eddie began emitting self-abusive statements regarding his own fatuity.

"Come out of it!" Anna comforted. "It's not your fault."

Quite hypnotized, Eddie ran the gamut of self-censure until he finally ran down. Then, declaring a moratorium, he begged them to join him in a sojourn to the next street to obtain a special, soul-saving anodyne of strong liquid which was served in tall, frosted glasses.

"How 'bout it, folks?" he begged. "I sure need company, an' pick-me-upi wth a lotta power per gallon. Let's give the ol' inner-man a drink and see if he won't talk back. I gotta stick near a telephone booth."

He rose from the table, as superinducement.

"Yes, get the check, Alfred. Let's go with him. We may be able to lend some helpful suggestion."

As they moved down the aisle, Alfred grasped Eddie by the arm, intending to walk him with decorum; but the *night owl* pulled away, shedding the shrewd eye of understanding, humorously indicating his strong recovery with a low-toned, "Ning."

Out on the sidewalk, Alfred ploughed through the autograph-collectors with the *hauteur* of a Baby Star.

"Now let's get our minds off of Paul Moody for a few minutes," Anna advised.

Eddie moved in between his friends and locked arms with them.

"We're the Three Musketeers," he insisted jovial-

ly. "Fun for all, an' all for fun! Now for that unfinished business."

"And that funny yarn," Alfred demanded.

With a demonic grin, Eddie asked like a master of ceremonies: "Shall I tell you the sad story about the Eskimo farmer an' the Eskimo farmer's daughter?"

CHAPTER X

THE TRIO was soon moored to a bar, anchored by three tall stools.

"Huzza! Smackee lippee!" Eddie lionized the bartender for his admixture.

After the second drink, his whole body, like a deciduous tree, proved spring was nigh. He commenced to bloom all over. Too much suppressed energy started him on an oration.

"Pause! Refresh yourselves! Bounce back to normal!" he commanded advertisingly. "Do you realize that you walk eight miles a day just doing housework? Take the blindfold test. Why, jittery, jangled nerves can lose a man his job! Send in a couple of box-wrappers and get a pink tooth brush of your own. Are you a pencil chewer? Does your penmanship torture you? Have you that tired feeling? Do people shun you?"

He grabbed a much-needed breath.

The poker-faced bartender focused a shrewd, ice-blue eye upon him, employing a what-the-hell-is-this expression.

Eddie lifted his head into the air like a dog, and howled: "How—'bout—a—drink?" in a cracked yodel.

Anna jumped. Alfred laughed. The bartender grinned through uneven gold. Then suddenly, from out of a dark booth near the end of the bar—as if in answer to Eddie's Alpine invitation—a smooth, pasty-faced runt of a man, with a bulb of a nose that was red and shiny, appeared.

He had been concealed, chaffering away time in a half-trance, awaiting just such a drink-on-the-house command. Making the bar in two long steps, he indulged in a salute remindful of early California, uttering a pathetic-toned: "Pal!"

After satisfying himself that the creature was not a pink elephant of his own imagination, Eddie mumbled: "Pal!" in return, allowing the intrusion.

The grateful little man snapped his round eyes, almost hidden under bushy brows. Modestly, he readjusted his orange tie which rode his collar triumphantly, bowed in the manner of yesteryear, and took his drink into his shadowed booth like a white mouse with a piece of cheese.

" 'Spose he does tricks, too?" Eddie said in a muffled undertone.

Noting Eddie's improvement drink by drink, gave Anna an inspiration. She slipped into the telephone enclosure and asked Edna Allar to join them.

Eddie all but passed out when she imparted her prank to him.

"You're terrible, Anna!" he stormed. "Edna'll put me right in the dog house an' throw away the key."

Nervously he gave himself a severe scrutiny in the bar mirror, then decided on donning his dark glasses. Resentfully, with pent-up masculine pride, he growled:

"Hope Edna leaves that damned Pomeranian hound dog at home."

Anna scoffed.

"I don't care," he returned as if henpecked. "Why can't a man like a girl without havin' to become a curb cartoon an' a tree inspector?"

The actors laughed him into a flushed countenance.

But Eddie changed, and was all smiles when Edna arrived in a striking black-and-white outfit. The Pomeranian at her feet was the touch which made the *tout ensemble* resemble a smart sketch by Patou.

Eddie accepted the leash as if he loved the dog, cleverly romping to the end of the bar with it, to get his alcoholic breath at a safe distance from his fiancee.

The Pomeranian proved to be a blessing in disguise. Whenever Edna's keen black eyes focused upon him, he concealed his inebriation by stooping to stroke the toy. The insincere action was two-

fold. It afforded splendid opportunity, through purled mutterings, to inform the dog just who it was the son of.

Eyeing him suspiciously, Edna finally asked with piercing sarcasm: "Well, Mr. Eddie O'Donnel, just how much have you imbibed since I last saw you?"

"Un-uh! Not me," Eddie answered like a chastised youth. "Not much licker has passed my lips."

"But plenty has splashed your tonsils!"

Eddie stooped to pet the dog.

Anna saved the situation by explaining the sad plight of Paul Moody, indulging in exceptional sympathy.

"What a dumb cluck to go fishing and leave no telephone number," Edna derided. "Who does he think he is, an executive?"

An emphatic nod to each ended with Eddie who stooped to pet the dog and rose too soon. With no occupation, he used the lamb-look of innocence.

"Listen, Edna," Anna attracted quickly, "we've got to think of some way to help Paul. See if this idea meets with your approval?"

Adroitly she arrived at the possibility of using Edna's car to enter a chase for the lost actor.

"Hah! Not much!" Edna said adamantly. "Not my Katy, you don't. My car's out of a job too just now."

A sneer came from her masculine friend.

"Don't be an ol' foam-over, Edna! Help give a guy a ride to success."

"Can't be done! You surprise me, darling. Have you noticed the condition of my flivver. I'd lend it to anyone for just around town; but it won't take any hills to Yosemite. Shall I say: on the level it's a good car?"

"Be big," Eddie clowned. "You'll be sorry if boys shun you at a party, an' we play smarty an' don't tell you why. Yeah!" He rolled his eyes like a pansy. "Will we laugh 'those way' at you!"

"Don't try to be so funny! My car hasn't had as many drinks as you have lately. Besides gas, think of the tires, wear and tear. You know I haven't a bank account now."

"Ah—hoarding!" Eddie accused with a dramatic finger. "I'll tell a G-man on you."

"You're lickered. And I'll bet you get the mulligrubs for being a popular tippler. You'll be sorry!"

Eddie patted his stomach in Falstaffian jovillity, indicating his camel capacity.

"This weak stuff?" he censured. "There's not a headache in a hogshead."

"Shall I crack wise about the hogshead?" Woefully Edna shook her head. "Eddie, sometimes I wonder about marrying you. Do you suppose you'll turn out to be a homing pigeon?"

"No more!" Eddie shouted.

He sank wearily against the bar with his lips moving insanely like a punch-drunk pugilist. Extracting his handkerchief, he waved it above his head in surrender.

"Whatamama!" he hissed. "Whatamama!"

"I'm not your mama, and perhaps I never shall be! You're such a baby." Edna melted instantly maternal. "I like you . . . "

"Make me know it!" Eddie's arms went out in imitation of a mammy-singer. "Rouge me plenty, baby!" he crooned.

Having broken her anger, he struck at her with playful taps like a boxer, achieved a hit-and-run kiss, and cautiously maneuvered for a clinch.

The noise of the telephone ended his fun.

"Saved by the bell!" he shouted like a referee, and ran to answer it.

With the closing of the booth doors, he grew solemn. The trio watched his figure through the glass; saw his face darken, and the cigarette he lit bob up and down speedily as he talked.

A mental turmoil began in Anna's mind. Her desire to help Paul Moody was balanced chaotically with a selfish thought relative to Alfred. Paul was indolent, a fiend helped her reason. This was Alfred's chance. His role; the opportunity he needed to *set* him properly on the screen.

Banging doors broke her reverie.

Eddie emerged from the booth, leaning against

it. While mopping his face with his handkerchief, he explained:

"At last they've located Paul at Haley's Camp. Car broke down. Just got it towed in. Paul's all busted up about the prospects of a job. Scared he'll never make it down in time, though. Wants me to get the casting office on the wire an' tell the truth. He's gotta small hope left that they'll wait."

Meditatively Eddie began walking in a circle, scraping his feet and mumbling to himself. When satisfied with some conversational attack, he darted into the enclosure again and slammed the doors.

"Aren't actors nutty?" Edna expounded. "They're such children—babies, in fact. They even need nipples on Scotch bottles."

Her attitude caused a frown on Alfred's brow.

"How come, Edna," he criticized. "You talk as though it served Paul right."

"Lord, no! Why, the poor kid hasn't worked in nearly a year." Astounded, she attempted to correct a wrong impression. "I couldn't lend my car for such a trip. It would break down sooner than theirs did. But I'll chip in to rent one if it will help. And please don't think me a pest because I ride Eddie about his drinking. Someone's got to do it. Sometimes I'm afraid for him."

Noisily Eddie stalked to the bar for liquid fortification.

Everyone desired to ask innumerable questions,

but no one would venture the first one. Even the hard-looking bartender paused while wiping his glasses to view Eddie's reflection in the mirror. After a diplomatic silence, Alfred risked:

"They wouldn't wait, eh?"

Eddie let loose a fierce grunt, then realized that his friends wanted the facts, apologized, and began relating them.

"For some strange reason," he outlined, "no studio will consider an actor after learning that he's out of town. Unless he's a 'big shot,' of course. Can't blame them, though, when you think of the necessary preparations. From all I can gather, it's a lengthy part."

His voice died away, and he turned his whisky glass around and around.

"I got a call in for Haley's Camp, but for the life of me I can't imagine how I'm ever goin' to break the news. What a spot!"

A silence fell, very distasteful to the bartender. Carefully, with sidelong glances at his sad customers, he rummaged his brain for something cheerful with which to jolly things along. At length, he blurted out:

"Women are bad enough, if you ask me; but why should a man allow something to come between himself and his business like fish?"

When his out-of-turn humor failed, he announced a drink-on-the-house.

"Bur-rr!" Eddie ejaculated at the sound of the sound of the telephnoe bell. "If I can get this over, it's all the phonin' I'm gonna do for a year."

He downed his drink in one gulp, departing with the air of one whose solemn duty it is to impart the news of a tragedy.

Silence became oppressive.

The heavy plock-plock of the wall clock rose relative to a foundry hammer, affecting the bartender's nerves. Instinctively he turned to putter with a squeaky radio.

The intricacy of life's strange plot, and the answer to the mystery, engrossed Alfred. He sat trying to apply all he had ever read to Paul Moody's case, wondering why it was, after months of idleness, that the actor should be led away from his opportunity on the very eve of it; and what possible emancipation there could be for the human race when, in the eternal pilgrimage, some power continually demanded payment to Karma for mistakes. The chain of his reasoning was broken ironically by a radio crooner proclaiming the rendition of a song entitled: "The world is waiting for the sunrise."

In a jittering frenzy, Eddie shuffled to the bar with the information that Paul Moody had taken the rap with the weight of a knock-out blow.

"Took it hard?" Alfred risked.

"Hard is no name for it!" Eddie thundered.

"What price friendship, I say! I think he's actin' damned ungrateful, too. He's ravin' mad! I talked to Archie after I got finished with Paul. Archie said Paul was rollin' on his cot, an' would bear watchin'. Said he had 'That Hollywood Sign.' "

"Don't allow it to get to you," Edna consoled. "Why, I think you've been wonderful, Eddie. What more could anyone do?"

Anna awaited a tactful opportunity and asked: "Why couldn't Alfred try for the role?" as if the idea had just occurred to her.

"Ab-so-lute-ly!" Eddie sanctioned. "Why not? Can't harm Paul's chances now. Hop to it kid! It must be a swell part; an' oughta be about ten weeks work."

Instantly elated, Alfred slid to the telephone booth like a baseball player. Anna followed like a coach.

"Don't be nervous," she charged. "Remember that ships come in over calm seas."

The group sat rooting for victory, as excited as any box-party in a grandstand. The lifeless bartender also poised himself in ninth-inning suspense, as if he had placed a substantial side-bet.

And quite unnoticed, the little pasty-faced runt of a man stuck his head out of his retreat to watch. He was no fool. He could vision six drinks ahead if Alfred achieved.

Suspense mounted with the moments.

Three men on bases, with three balls and two strikes on a hard-hitting batter in the last inning of a grudge game, could not have held an audience at greater tension, until Alfred finally sauntered to the bar like a player who had fanned.

"No deal," he said gamely, taking his stool.

His noble effort in attempting to conceal the searing disappointment was reverenced by friendly silence.

CHAPTER XI

"HELLO . . . ANNA? This is Alfred. I'm calling you from downstairs. I'm in your lobby."

"Did you see Edna?"

"I sure did."

"What was the verdict?"

"Okay. She lent me her car without reservations. I have it out front now."

"I'll be right down."

Anna and Alfred found little or no disparity between them. Differing so slightly in mental views, caused the sensitive conformity to be regarded as some connate surprise, but they never mentioned it.

"Well, here I am. Quick, eh?" Anna said as she emerged from the elevator. "Have you heard the news?" she asked with a "too bad" inflection.

"How could I help from knowing; the papers are full of it?"

"Let's drive along the boulevard and see if we can gather any profitable information."

"Right."

They hurried out to the curbing.

"Will Edna be surprised!" Alfred jested as they climbed into the ancient flivver. "I gave her car a rub-down and facial. The rust is gone from the hood. The car is no longer Titian. She's a brunette again."

"Be serious, Alfred. I'm all agog. If this news is correct, how can everyone live?"

"It's beyond me. I'm numb from thinking."

Morning newspapers had carried an interview which was interpreted as an edict. A motion-picture executive had asked all studios to cooperate in either a complete close-down for eight weeks, or a cut in salary of fifty per cent, explaining that drastic measures were necessary in order to save the business from toppling into a financial abyss.

"Say something, Alfred. How can you be so calm?"

"I'll listen to all answers; but I'm frank when I say I haven't an opinion. The bombshell was too startling."

"A fifty per cent cut in salary may not worry you or I at the moment," Anna pointed out truthfully, "but an eight-week close-down would be disastrous. How awful!"

To Anna it seemed that a protracted curse had been hurled from the invisible, and that one of the Four Horsemen was galloping away from pestilen-

tial earth with strangled *Hope* prostrate in his fiendish arms.

Along the boulevard they jogged in the noisy wreck, gathering information wherever they found congregated actors.

"Turn back, Alfred. I'm gasoline conscious. Everyone is just soap-boxing. No one knows what he's talking about. I won't go to a silly old protesting mass meeting if they do hold one. What good will it do? We're in a boat without oars."

Responding too quickly, Alfred turned the car about with a jerk. It oscillated ungainly, settled down gradually like a hen over her eggs, then the motor stalled.

"What a car! What a car!" Anna groaned resentfully. "No wonder Edna would lend it only 'for just around town.' Or should we criticize?"

Numerous horns screamed indignantly from behind, then elegant cars swerved to pass snootily. By jumps the flivver responded to delicate treatment and sputtered along with obstreperous indignity. Mutely the actors drove toward Hollywood Cemetery and stopped at the House of Perdue.

"Ask the price of a Cecil Brunner wreath," Anna requested as Alfred alighted at the flower shop.

Minutes passed.

Her nervousness caused her to turn irritably upon him when she at last heard his footfalls. The huge

bundle of yellow roses he carried changed her and she went into savage ecstasies over them.

"Oh, but Alfred, how much did they cost?"

He arranged the flowers without reply. His peculiar attitude dampened her enthusiasm; and when he climbed in the car, she noticed a thin film over his eyes which commanded reverence.

"What on earth has happened, Alfred?"

He rolled the car into traffic before speaking.

"Old Man Perdue got me down," he related unwillingly. "You know, he still furnishes some of the flowers used on studio sets. Thought we might as well patronize him with our mite. He's a grand old man."

Alfred paused to watch a burly policeman drop his hand and wave them on.

"Perdue welcomed me like a lost son. He was crazy to talk—wanted all the studio gossip and so forth. I got fidgety, and quickly changed the subject by asking the price of some flowers on his work table. The flowers looked fine to me. I don't know what made me, but when he told me that they were to be thrown away, I heard myself asking for them."

"Alfred!"

"After studying me strangely, he asked what occasion demanded flowers. When I told him George Stinzel's grave, he just keeled over against me and cried like a baby."

"Why?"

"Yes, I had forgotten, too. Stinzel was sponsoring the old man's daughter until she lost her life. Got burned to death in a fire picture. I at last got him calmed down, and puttered about the shop to allow him to recover sufficiently, so I thought; when all at once, he appeared before me with all the roses he could carry. And to make it more difficult, he wouldn't take any money."

"Gee," Anna mumbled, "is this town full of stories!"

"I left with him imploring me to drop in soon for a chat. I must do it. If you feel inclined, I'd like you to go with me."

"Of course."

At the cemetery, they were informed that it was quite a walk to George Stinzel's grave. They passed down a winding path where small groups of mourners were weeping as silently as the willow branches overhead.

On approaching a picturesque little bridge, Anna watched the sun sparkle on the stream running beneath it, and listened to its gurgling soliloquy. "There is no death," the rippling water told her; and rushed on rejoicing, as surely as the souls that had once inhabited each body now buried on its banks.

Her reasoning submitted to inversion.

Where was George Stinzel now, a still voice

asked? Was his soul dormant, standing ready to enter a young body, to begin the pilgrimage all over again? Could that be the fate of one indulging in self-destruction?

A shudder shook her shoulders.

"Anna!" Alfred prevailed, taking her arm. "You promised you wouldn't. Don't be affected all over again today."

"I shall keep it," she assured.

They had planned to arrive after the obsequies, place the flowers and leave. As they neared the grave, they discovered that it was still honored by two people.

"George Stinzel's mother, and brother," Anna whispered.

While waiting to be taken into the sanctity, Anna buried her face in the midst of the roses. Clearly she realized that without the producer's timely payment, she too might be reclining underground. Her eyes lifted to look out across innumerable marble stones. The still city of the dead seemed to speak in unison. "Be not afraid," came the necropolitan message, translated by the whispering breeze in the willows.

Moving mechanically over to Anna, George Stinzel's mother muttered: "May I direct you?" through a damp, black handkerchief. When it was made clear that the huge bundle of roses was for her son's grave, she could not find voice to answer

and extended a welcome with a helpless gesture.

Apprehensive, the brother came to her assistance. Mrs. Stinzel waved him away and took Anna's arm instead. After the flowers were placed, she locked arms with Alfred and walked away with them. Once, on the way to the street, she attempted speech.

"I remember you, Miss Hall," she began clearly, after which her mouth moved on grotesquely without issuing any sound.

Again before entering her limousine, she made another attempt, a few words at a time.

"Of all the people—my son has helped—in one way—or another—you were the only ones who came . . . "

Her gutteral mumblings modulated to a faint whisper and faded entirely.

The brother feigned interest in the whirl of corner traffic. Anna toyed with her purse, as if the clasp needed mending. Alfred transferred his gaze across the street, where a workman toiled at chiseling a lapidary adulation on an elaborate monument, and thought: What great preparations man has always made for this thing called *death;* in a marble yard lies the dust of human emotion.

Presently, in acknowledged failure, Mrs. Stinzel tapped Anna on the shoulder and extended a pencil, and an address book for her to inscribe. By the time the limousine rolled into traffic, the little

mother had forced a smile, waving a wet piece of lace from the rear window.

With pulse somewhat effected, the actors stood on the curbing waving little half-gestures until the car was lost to sight.

"Anna Hall!" came a shout from across the street.

Strident horn-taps from a chocolate-colored sedan changed Anna's beautiful thoughts to hate.

"Lord!" she gasped. "The pestiferous Adolph Kaliz."

"Who, Anna?"

"My Mephistopheles. Let's get going to our car."

Adolph Kaliz raised his voice disgracefully.

"What are you doing at a cemetery," he asked.

"George Stinzel," Anna replied in a loud whisper.

"That's right. I forgot all about him. Are you going home from here?"

Smiling vacantly, as if misunderstanding, Anna moved sideways along the curbing. The roar of traffic mounted like a thundering sea. Cars aided the situation by passing between.

"Quick, Alfred! He's turning his motor to follow. I must lose him."

They rushed to the flivver and jumped in like collegians.

"Thank heaven!" Anna exclaimed when the engine started instantly.

Shooting into traffic, Alfred turned at the nearest intersection. A shrill police whistle vibrated accusingly against his ears and he became cognizant of having made a prohibited left-hand turn. Fear of a fine made his foot refuse to move to the brake; for through the reflecting mirror, he saw an enraged officer dodge between cars for a glimpse of their license number.

"Oh, Alfred. I've got the jitters. Do you think he got it?"

"I'm sure he didn't."

Alfred turned right and right again at the next corner. His haste got him trapped between the curb and a mammoth gas truck carrying a trailer. The trailer ripped off a front fender from the frail car as easily as one tears cellophane from a confection. Ignorant of his hit-and-run accident, the driver sat calmly in his cupola. The ponderous truck jangled on.

The actors exchanged desperate glances.

"Lord, Alfred, how much will it cost to get a fender massaged?"

"How can I tell? Well, we evaded your Mr. Satan and got hell for doing it."

"I suppose we've got to consider ourselves lucky that it wasn't worse."

"Right! That trailer could have performed a Cæsarean with the motor just as easily."

"Let's hurry. It may take a long time to get it

ironed out. No, no!" she countermanded apprehensively. "Take it slowly. I just remembered that Edna's insurance has run out. Gee, I'm scared."

She glanced out to the rear.

"Guess we've faded the old pursuer out of the picture. You know, it's strange, and I can't explain it, but that man Kaliz pops up at the most unexpected moments in my life. He dissolves in like the Devil. That's why I think of him as Mephistopheles. I feel as if I'm playing the part of Marguerite to his Mephisto."

Her accumulated emotion caused an outburst of idiotic laughter in a tone that did not seem her own.

"Oh, what a day! What a day!" she moaned ironically. "Phantasmagoria is a good dizzy word, Alfred; and I'm dizzy. Where am I anyway? Is all this a dream? I'm beginning to wonder if you and I are actually alive. Do you suppose we really did end it all last night, and haven't found it out? Perhaps George Stinzel didn't commit suicide. Perhaps we didn't go to Henry Mun's party. Are you sure about anything? As I trace the moments back to the palm tree—where I think I met you—I wonder."

CHAPTER XII

SUNDAY.

In the center of several acres, Harold Lock's modern-Italian mansion rested on the side of a great hill like the city that could not be hid. Flanking three sides of a picturesque patio, tall coco palms swayed in a light breeze from the ocean, nodding their umbrella topknots in approval of the gay festivities below.

Occasional slaps of water slushed over the sides of an iridescent swimming pool, frightening feminine bystanders who were ravishingly beautiful in chiffon, or sport attire. A bouncing water-polo ball caused happy excitement. Deep baritone laughter, real and infecting, was echoed by soprano shrieks, unreal but inviting.

Color, color everywhere, against a gorgeous carpet of green broken by walks leading to interesting *rendezvous*. At atmosphere of gaiety in tune with affluence. A sense of security. Laughter, life, and fun.

"Please, God, don't let it end!" Anna mumbled softly, yet felt like shouting it.

Under a multi-colored umbrella at a wrought-iron table, she sat in pure-white organdie—a creation of simplicity—unconsciously a part of the dazzling scene.

Having watched her with the interest of a painter, Alfred leaned in nearer. "A penny?" he asked gently. "A penny for your thoughts? That's about all I have to offer."

She turned, startled, and winked both eyes at him.

"My heart was going pitty-pat in response to the beauty of these grounds," she confided. "And you?"

"About the same, I suppose. A befitting and consoling line from Signor Florenzo's anthology crossed my mind: 'There is no possession; there is only attraction.' "

Anna's hand went suddenly over her mouth. "Lord, have mercy!" she groaned. "A heavy would have to enter just at this ecstatic moment."

"Who?"

"The money-monger. My Mephisto! The satanic Mr. Adolph Kaliz who made us lose a fender in trying to avoid him."

Looking askance across the lawn, Alfred predicted: "He evidently intends to camp; he's bringing his drink along."

"And if I conclude that I can't stand the strain, you may meet me in the lower garden where we saw the peacocks."

She lifted her voice to greet the intruder as pleasantly as she dared.

The banker grasped her hand to press it to his lips, then adjusted his bifocal glasses for a better impression of the picture she presented; and finally condescended to recognize Alfred with a curt nod.

"I shake a good hoof," Mr. Kaliz began slangily, "if someone as lovely as you would care about dancing on the veranda?"

Anna grunted aloud as if frightened. Alfred groaned inwardly with *ennui.*

When Anna declined the dance invitation, the intruder released a cocktail of words in Latin and sat resting his case.

Though the banker often mingled his pedantic phrases with slang to temper them, the keen-minded penetrated his veneer and the erudite pitied him. Most of the profession looked upon him as a necessary evil to the production of motion pictures. Men hated the juxtaposition of his words. Women hated his pruriency, which they detected quickly enough to put him at a disadvantage.

Anna kept the conversation light, fully aware that he was the type who, if given the slightest chance at any question of importance, invariably begins with: "Well, I'll tell you," in that frightening tone which means that the subject will now be exhausted.

Mr. Kaliz laughed at little things Anna said in order to induce her to laugh at his jests. Secretly he desired to become a *raconteur;* and tirelessly endeavored to perfect a hearty laugh which would elevate his tone out of the tired-business-man's category into the hell-with-it abandon of the actor. And so he listened very keenly to any sort of gay outburst, quite sensitive to the fact that his laughter still retained a little of that you-laughed-at-my-joke now I'll-laugh-at-yours of the commercial luncheon.

With a sigh of boredom, Anna dropped her head so that her great floppy hat became a shield from the banker's gaze. Presently she became engrossed in the fun at an adjacent table.

The banker interested himself in the tenor of their laughter.

A large group was playing a game of pertinent questions. Just now, the interlocutor controlling the choice, pointed a dramatic finger at a modest girl, shouting: "What's the worst thing in the world?"

Adolph Kaliz thought the game silly.

"Well, I'll tell you," he began as Anna knew he would. "The worst thing in the world is a call from a goddam broker asking for additional coverage on your stock."

Anna's eyes went heavenward and she grimaced as if an unpleasant odor had assailed her nostrils.

"You!" The banker tried the dramatic-finger gesture. "Your answer, Miss Hall."

An icy voice which she did not recognize as being her own answered for her. "What a girl told me she was afraid of: A hotel key that might not fit any more in a room lock."

The banker laughed with no understanding.

"Say," he interrupted himself. "I nearly forgot what I came over here to tell you," he said sincerely. "I was chatting with a director about you not five minutes ago."

Anna's thin eyebrows arched. A suspicious smile hovered about tightly-drawn lips.

"Believe me. This is no game of *trade last*. Harry Neil said he was glad I brought your name to his attention. Said he was going to drop over and see you. Surely a title role shouldn't be hard to take?"

"Nice," Anna parried conventionally; then sensing an ounce of sincerity, relaxed and thanked him liberally.

True to the banker's prediction, the young director was soon at her side for a whispered conference.

Alfred turned away to watch the mad swimmers scramble for the water-polo ball. Mr. Kaliz nodded his *carte blanche* whenever he caught Harry Neil's eye; and when he departed, walked a few paces with him, apparently placing strong instructions.

"Alfred," Anna whispered, "what do you make of it all?"

Perplexity was mixed with his smile.

Also in a state of wonderment, Anna dropped her eyes to the modest corsage Alfred had given her. There might be more than one reason for life-desire, she thought as she recalled the terse inscription on an inclosed card. "Flowers for the living," he had written in florid calligraphy as charmingly old-fashioned as the posy.

Mr. Kaliz strutted back to the table with an "okay" attitude in his carriage.

"Great part!" he promised. "I read the manuscript a couple of days ago. It won't be any 'quickie' either. Of course I know, because the money's right on the line."

"Thanks for your interest."

A wild cry went up from the pool. Players demanded the ball rolling toward the banker's feet. In tussling for it, Adolph Kaliz spilled his drink, cursed and resigned. Victorious, Alfred ran along the water's edge and, as was the laymen's privilege whenever the ball left the pool, stood ready to hurl it at any protruding head.

Making the most of a golden opportunity, the broker launched an invidious attack upon Alfred to make him seem ridiculous, which proved the cunningness of premeditation; then he expressed the hot birth of his desire in a salacious stanza which

he had evidently memorized well and used often. Demanding complete understanding, he explained its humor by repeating the last two lines with added zest:

"And the good die first,
So why not cut-rate love?"

Leaning back in his chair, he laughed uproariously, like a youngster who has just told his junior the playground meaning of *eureka.* Once he paused to listen to his tones, pronounced them okay for sound, and continued with one eye screwed closed.

A great inarticulate surge of grief welled up in Anna's throat; then the piquancy of surprise faded, the bacteria of his remarks penetrated, her eyes narrowed and her breath came faster. Nervous fingers fumbled at the long pin securing her corsage. She wished it were stronger; for like Charlotte Corday, she desired to remove a rogue for posterity's sake.

The murderous thought she quickly overpowered; but the bitterness churning in her breast made her hand jerk with an impulse to slap his face. Then diplomacy dictated. Her brain cleared. Her pulse relaxed; and out of the past came an inspiration as her reward.

"I remember a child teaching," she replied. "It is a jingle such as yours."

Looking straight into the eyes of her opponent, she began a decorous answer which at once made the banker an inchworm:

"I have to live with myself, and so,
I want to be fit for myself to know:
I want to be able as years go by,
Always to look myself in the eye.
I mustn't flinch when the race is won,
Hating myself for the things I've done."

"What you recitin' for, Anna Hall?" came from behind. "Gettin' ready for a screen test?"

"Eddie O'Donnel!" she exclaimed gratefully.

"That's me! Always slippin' up on you, ain't I? Howdy, Mr. Kaliz! I'm a little ginnied if anyone cares."

The broker managed a glum nod.

"I'll recite too an' annoy hell outa you," Eddie chortled. "Here goes, loud and lousy:

'Night falls without breakin'
An' day breaks without fallin' . . .

but I fall without any kind of a break," he interpolated, "or I wouldn't be sap enough to lug this damned Pomeranian hound dog aroun'."

He jerked on the leash, landing the dog on the table as easily as an organ grinder does his monkey.

Appreciating the opportunity of having something on which to concentrate, Anna petted the dog's head. A similar reason caused Mr. Kaliz to pet the other half, but he ceased when his half turned and bit him.

"Can't fool a dog!" Eddie kidded and saw that his tsatement was not appreciated. "Well, well," he rambled on, "howddajado? Hoddajado? Howda-jew? What—no welcome? Now that I spoke my piece, I'd think you'd ask a guy to park his body, as we say in the underworld. Ain't I the gangster now? A little run down is all."

Somewhat defeated, Eddie relaxed, and cracked his knuckles while he tried to fathom the depression.

"How are you, Mr. Kaliz?" He started afresh. "You haven't opened your trap. Nobody smiles. Nobody wrinkles. Nobody even puckers! In a minute I'll say 'phoey to you from me.' "

A nauseated expression faded over the financier's countenance.

"Listen," Eddie gushed like an ingenue. "If you'll let me sit a spell, I'll tell you a crummy joke. I'll tell you how you can eat your cake an' have it, too—an' the answer is: eat it in bed."

Detecting violated propriety, Eddie skidded a chair close to Anna, attempting to prompt a smile.

"Don't you treat me this-a-way, Anna Hall. No kiddin', you look gorgeous. Swell! Clean an'

everythin'. If there's one thing I like better'n anythin' else, it's a clean girl. How 'bout you, Mr. Kaliz?" he finished ambiguously.

For occupation, Anna made him dodge a playful slap.

"What you say, Anna, marry me an' fool everybody? Don't answer too soon. I believe in lettin' a woman think. Don't you, Adolph—or do you?"

Diplomacy prompted Anna to inquire about Edna.

"Aw, she's powderin' somethin' or other. Now let's see. Where were we? Oh, yes. There's no hits, no runs, and' one error. Who made it? An' what about the fifty per cent cut in salary or the eight-week close-down? Why, workin' hours are terrible as they are. Every intelligent person knows that ideal hours are: from eleven 'til two with an hour for lunch. So the code is wrong? The situation's wrong. No smile, no fun, no drink? I'm wrong!" After gasping for a much needed breath, he concluded: "An' that's Jimmie Durante! Do you want the sea lion?"

To reward his efforts, Anna parted her alluring lips.

"How 'bout it, Adolph?" Eddie lamented disgustedly. "Might you laugh if I broke my whosis?"

"Eddie, you're crazy for sure!" Anna filled the breach. "But it's a nice craziness; and you may

steal Alfred's drink there if you're dying, although, from the way you're acting, I think you've had sufficient."

"No haven't!" he whined. "This is yesterday's jag with ice water on top. Did you ever drink ice water on top of the night's champagne, Adolph?"

The banker flushed.

"Was the champagne, ah," he drawled, "that you had last night, ah, good?"

"Ah, yes, an' ah, no!" Eddie yawned, allowing him to wonder if he were being mocked. "Still, you gotta remember that ol' proverb: There's no fool like the drunk who lights both ends and gathers his candle too. Anahoo, I can't remember the champagne. I can only recall the gin."

He paused to taste Alfred's drink with non-committal chicken sips like a connoisseur. As if the bouquet had infected him, he pounded upon the table like a lecturer, and was off again.

"Take tippling, with all its dizzy angles! An' what is the question of the day, my friends? Ah, but the answer is far more important than the question. So you tell me the answer, an' I'll tell you the question of the day."

Eddie focused brazenly upon the obdurate banker.

"Adolph," he ended exhaustedly, "take a big suck . . . Take a big sucker like me. Whadjasay

we don't take up the dirty ol' amoeba at this meetin'? Let's take a big . . . "

"If," the financier broke in forcefully, "some people stopped to *think* while talking, they might think to *stop* talking."

Mr. Kaliz evidenced the fierce eye of the loser.

"You're tops!" Eddie intoned like a pansy.

Fearful of disgraceful trouble, Anna rose and called to Alfred.

Unconscious of the situation, he ran up with breathy aspirations, playfully grabbing for his drink. Eddie gulped it down greedily. The speed of it iced his tongue and he let it hang out like a dog's for the sun to warm. The two clinched and scuffled. During a second's pause in the silly horseplay, Eddie caught sight of Edna.

"Pardon my departure," he half-clowned. "I see mama on the veranda talkin' to an author. I must hop over an' get 'im to write me a speech for my landlord. Well, keep your finger nails clean, folks, you might get invited out." Shoving off like a swimmer, he yelled back: "Doncha pan me while I'm gone. What a spot to be in!"

"That guy's nutty!" Adolph Kaliz said in relief.

He rose, taking advantage of the general movement for an easy departure. Instinct compelled Alfred to fix belligerent eyes upon him. The two men shook hands briefly like boxers in an arena.

"Doncha pan me while I'm gone," the banker copied Eddie.

Before she could remove it, he had Anna's hand in his grasp at his lips; then he glanced at his watch with arched eyebrows, significant of an appointment and departed.

Indeed he did have business to prosecute. It was as crafty as the mission Judas once had, and his kiss was a Judas kiss; for, in due time, the young director was again at Anna's side. His tongue, subtle in its adroitness, shot in and out of his mouth like that of a snake while he explained his regret.

"I understand. Mr. Angison doesn't think I'm the type," Anna finished for him. "And you'll tell Mr. Kaliz that you had an easy time in making it clear to me, won't you?"

A smile, as sickly as the scheme he had sponsored, contracted Harry Neil's mouth and he slunk away like a sycophant.

Sensing her withering heart, and knowing that she had to drink the bitter calix alone, Alfred turned away, feigning to search in his pocket for a cigarette. His fingers met the hairpin with which Anna had secured the note in George Stinzel's car. "Damned Hollywood merry-go-round!" he said in his heart, grit his teeth, and scanned the grounds for sight of their Irish friend.

The world seemed suddenly emptied to Anna. Her heart throbbed as if it had reached its destination. She was surprised when no tears came. She felt more like laughing, which frightened her a little; certain that a single outburst would end in hysteria, with the possibility of being carried from the grounds in a frenzied state to awaken in some charitable institution.

Lately, she had been willing to welcome obscurity—willing to relinquish the personal worship usually bestowed upon her for a table in the wilderness—desiring nothing but relief from fawning life which continually ground its teeth at her in carniverous anticipation; but that was all over now.

The statistical disclosure of Signor Florenzo was proof enough, true, and decidedly nauseous: "All the luxury we enjoy about us is the result of thinking by only two per cent of the population."

What could possibly be the matter with the other ninety-eight per cent? Were they, like herself, without the blessing of the creative spark? Sterility in the flesh was often condemned with a wry smile and the lifting of eyebrows—but what of mental infecundity? If the survival of the fittest was the eternal scheme, when would there be a survival of the unfit? What became of the supernumeraries in the play when the final curtain was rung down?

Her eyes found rest in the far-off valley.

In a jigsaw pattern, representing the active city, ponderous traffic wound sinuously in and out of thousands of thoroughfares like ants *en route* to

some compelling destination. For what purpose, she asked the age-old question. Two airplanes crossed her line of vision, another symbol of human progress in spite of protracted heartaches.

The human fault, she resented, was that man was ever hoarding—for self and posterity—for souls unborn. He was continually ignoring contemporary life; and jealously hazarding all in a strange ambitious attempt to contribute some deposit, as an annuity, to the credit of his successors—remaining deliberately deaf to any SOS call from his indigent, hoodwinked brother. The whole procession was passing on as an endless army, with strict orders from some omnipotent officer to ignore fallen, bleeding comrades.

Momentarily her mind relaxed to watch the manuevering airplanes settle over the glass-roofed studios at Culver City—reflecting the afternoon sun with the splendor of a photographic effect—then her brain ran riot again.

Screen plays were now being made beneath those studio roofs—for the entertainment of the souls in those myriad homes for miles about—under hardships the outside world would never know, or care about. A venial sin, for the reverse was equally true. Those people would not be exempt from chaos in the house of life, before seeking solace in the entertainment now being prepared for that very purpose.

A circle! A circle! she deduced. Yes, an awful diabolical circle! And human beings had no consolation, as confined as fish in a bowl, with no mitigation from that cankerous eruption of futility they unfathomingly called *life*.

Alfred was quite correct about man's inhumanity to man—or was it Signor—or George Stinzel who had voiced it?

A pseudohallucination of the late George Stinzel culminated her day-dream by fading into the gauzy horizon, gravitating earthward. The cloudy apparition shook her, and she turned quickly to Alfred with the puerile demand:

"Talk to me! Alfred, tell me a joke."

Gradually he calmed her.

"Dear me!" she groaned presently, looking over Alfred's shoulder. "I see Edna approaching. She's ragging Eddie. I just can't stand any quarreling today. See what you can do."

"I'll fix it." He raised his voice humorously. "Hey, Eddie! That big laugh is needed. How about that imitation of tired butter. How are you, ol' kid?"

"How am I?" Eddie blustered. "That's a laugh!"

With disgust written on his face, Eddie penguined up to the table, leading the Pomeranian like an old *boulevardier*. He sat phlegmatically, with weight and a sigh.

"Feel low?" Alfred prompted.

"Hah! Lower than a cockroach in a basement. Edna's got me mousetrapped. I think I'll go fem and carry a gun. She gives me the jello-jitters! Well," he sputtered and blew his breath out exhaustedly, "all things come to an end—even radio talk."

Edna sat, with pleasant greetings, slipped aching feet out of tight slippers, and gushed: "Anna, dear, I must tell you about a new cold cream that makes you feel like fifty hours sleep."

"Better use it on your feet," her fiance pointed. "If the shoe don't fit buy it!" Eddie whitewashed his flat humor by hurrying on, as if it had another meaning. "Wanta hear somethin' crazy? Get a load of this!" he insisted.

Eager listeners vindicated him.

"See that little tent over on the lawn that looks like a Chic Sale house? Harold Lock has an astrologer housed in it. Just saw Pedro Morelli, the lense louse, comin' out after gettin' his fortune told. Pedro just lost a feature-picture role by gettin' a summer haircut. He usually looks like a gypsy. Bet the astrologer told 'im to quit playin' Samson an' he'd get a strong part."

"Tough!" Alfred sympathized.

"Sure," Eddie scoffed, "but it's gettin' so that if a part calls for a rough guy, the castin'-office boys do a Sherlock Holmes with magnifyin' glasses, lookin' for real scars."

Anna frowned, wondering how Booth, Barrett, or the great Salvini might have condemned typecasting. Becoming conscious of a distasteful harangue, she pleaded:

"Let Eddie alone, Edna! I asked him to be silly. Why can't we all? What does it matter?"

"I'm signin' off," Eddie announced. "Somebody has spoiled this station's style. And just for that, I'm off the gold standard!"

Edna topped: "You're off regardless of gold! You've been off since repeal."

Noting her friend's repeated protest, Edna turned studious eyes upon her.

"What's the matter, Anna? You look pale. Maybe the astrologer could throw some light upon your destiny. Why don't you go over and let him read you?"

"No thanks. I think I know my destiny. It couldn't be read. I think it's black!"

After an uncomfortable pause, Alfred suggested drinks.

"An ol' fashioned for mine," Eddie brightened. "You know, without all the garbage in it. Guess I'll go over with you," he suggested, hoping to qualify.

Edna caught him by the coat tail.

"You'll stay here where I can watch you. You old pantry drinker!"

Eddie jumped up and down, aviating comically,

with the grand posture of a relay runner.

"I go, I go, I go!" he clowned.

"Now I'll conjugate one!" his fiancee flared. "I burn, I burn, I burn!"

"Very irregular," Eddie topped, yelled: "It's the guano!" and sat glumly.

"Don't think me harsh," Edna mothered. "I know your proclivities. If you even hear about a party you go out like a fireman."

Alfred took final orders and skipped across the lawn toward the bar.

"Look at me, Anna!" Edna stood modeling her figure elatedly. "See my spaghetti lines? Just got weighed and found that there's a lot less girl."

Anna approved. Eddie derided.

"It's the guano!" he lectured. "She's tryin' to get all skin an' bones. By the time we get married there won't be any skin."

After a lightning analysis, Edna asked: "What *is* it, Anna? I saw you talking to Adolph Kaliz. Did he render you so pensive, or whatever it is you are?"

"He threw his usual insult, but this time it was brutal."

Eddie relieved himself. "Aw, he's the kind of a guy that makes me long for the age when I can afford the luxury of makin' enemies. The ol' sour puss! He's the guano!"

"Give on this guano business?" Edna snapped.

"Won't tell!" Eddie wiggled his ears. "Can I help it if you're ignorant an' never consult a dictionary?" he ridiculed and drew his head in modestly like a turtle.

Alfred shuffled up to the table like a Harlem waiter, balancing drinks upon a palm-leaf fan.

"Just saw Audrey Berkin," he said to all, and under his breath to Anna, informed: "She wants you to notice how swell she looks."

Some of the sadness faded from Anna's face. It gave her a warm feeling of elation to note how well Audrey wore the frock she had given her. Of Alfred, she inquired:

"Do you suppose those are the airplanes working on that air picture Audrey told us about? I see her on the lower lawn, waving like mad."

"They are," Edna answered for him. "And Ben Greve is the lad. Guess she likes that camera man, eh? And it's too bad, 'cause I hear it's not so mutual."

Sentimentally, with the sincerity of a sage, Eddie said: "When it ain't fifty-fifty, this thing called *love* is the guano."

Edna rested an amorous arm on his shoulder. "You wouldn't treat mama that way, would you?"

"So you're gettin' kittenish?" Eddie eyed her disdainfully. "Gimmie one good reason?"

She kissed him impulsively, then shook her head.

"There's something Scotch about you," she chas-

tized. "And it certainly is your breath."

The alcoholic chemistry was at a proper valance to neutralize Eddie's complex. Bravely he struck his chest, asserting himself like a cave-man:

"Tarzan—me! He sock you—in jaw—if you no be good girl!"

Humiliating laughter from her friends brought Edna under subjection. Humbled by Eddie's self-assurance, she gave him a cave-woman hug, and assured:

"You're tops."

Her conqueror led her confidentially aside.

"Just for that hug," he whispered, "I'll tell you a secret. Now lay off me today, because this is my last bender. No more hooch at all. I landed the publicity job that I've been jockeyin' for for months. Boy, what I'm goin' to do for you an' Anna!"

The noisy airplanes circled closer.

"Eddie," Alfred indicated the lower lawn, "who's that boy standing by Audrey? He's waving a message to the plane by means of two handkerchiefs."

"I can read wigwag," Eddie boasted.

Like one viewing an eclipse, he lifted his drinking glass to look through its crystal amber. Edna jerked his sleeve in disapproval.

"Don't be an ol' keyholer," she protested.

"Lay off, *frow!* It can't be so vital," he speculated. "This is it! Here it comes!" He read: " 'Fin-

ished — by — four — tell — Audrey — wait — for — me — Ben.' Ain't love grand!" he shouted and wrestled Edna about much to her discontent.

Anna watched the airplanes take altitude and disappear in the roseate west. Perhaps the romance would now form amicably, she hoped. Ben Greve had sent Audrey a request to wait for him. Perhaps some streak of fate would arrange to unite them forever. Her reverie was broken by Alfred's snapping fingers.

"I'm interlocutor!" he insisted. "What's the worst thing in the world, Edna?"

"Easy. Not one stocking without a run."

"And you, Eddie?"

"No whisky for your ginger ale."

Edna dug her nails into Eddie's flesh. "You swore off, you brute!"

"Have a heart, Edna! Your red nails'll get me down with some kind of phobia. That colored stuff may be oak for toe nails," he advised and was sorry.

"Just where have you seen red toe nails?"

"I've been to the beach," he exonerated himself.

An inexplicable compulsion had rivited Anna's attention to the activities of her host. Harold Lock's debonair manner and *savoir vivre* held her irresistibly. An abstracting evaluation was inchoate as she watched him move from table to table, group to group, contributing to the desires of his guests.

When he at last approached her, shedding his infectuous smile, she forgot the hurt of the afternoon; and her spirits rose like cream in spite of its previous skimming.

"Won't you and Miss Allar please pour tea for me?" he begged, and chuckled. "I think we'll actually have some customers when it gets a little cooler even though the bar seems to be the popular *rendezvous*. By the way, why not stroll over there with me now? I want to be sure that you know everyone. I mean better than mere formal presentation."

The augmented foursome cut across the lawn, chatting gayly. Gradually Harold Lock fell back to walk beside Anna.

"What a mutual friend we have in Signor Florenzo, Miss Hall." He lowered his voice. "Do you mind if I say that I've been thinking a great deal about you since our casual meeting at his studio?"

Amiable prospects were shooting in and out of her mind so fast that she said "no" several times for fear that he might misunderstand.

"I have," the star continued. "I must confess that I telephoned you several times. I didn't leave my name, however. I suppose I should have. Hope you'll forgive me."

In attempting to extend a luncheon invitation, he began to stammer, got quite confused, and expressed himself with sheepish embarrassment.

"Do you know," he owned, "I think I'm as fussed as you said you were the night I met you. Let's all have some wine and then perhaps I'll get straightened out," he laughed. "Who knows?" He raised his voice a few tones. "Do you care for champagne, Miss Allar?"

Eddie answered for her. They all moved onward toward the bar.

All conversation suddenly ceased in the patio. Guests turned questioningly toward each other, cocking an ear, as people do on sensing the first vibrations of distant thunder.

The roar of a powerful motor car, tearing up the hill, impinged their ears. Something foreboding spread through the gathering. Everyone frowned, staring into space.

The noise increased. The car drew nearer. After a series of exhaust explosions, it was heard passing through the *porte cochère* under screeching brakes.

Excusing himself, Harold Lock ran toward the garage.

The spirit of inharmony pervading the atmosphere penetrated the minds of the noisy swimmers. One by one they climbed out of the pool; but their frowns of inquiry were returned by vacant expessions.

Presently, a cry which numbed the senses rang out from the rose garden. Everyone turned to watch the limp body of Audrey Berkin carried into

the library; then, with one mind, guests rushed to the veranda for information.

The youth who had driven up with the tragic news emerged from the library; and in raspy, sympathetic tones, told how two airplanes, filming a picture at Santa Monica, had collided at an altitude of three thousand feet and had fallen in a tangled mess into the ocean.

Screams filled the air.

"About sixteen men were lost," the boy predicted. "They won't know exactly until a studio check is made. Ben Greve and the director are the only ones they're sure about. Speed boats were sent out quickly; but they rescued no one, and now it's too late."

Half-clad swimmers ran up from the dressing rooms as the sense of tragedy filtered through. The story was told and retold until a reverential silence fell, and guests began to slip quietly away to their cars.

Audrey Berkin was causing considerable anxiety in the library. She lay upon a great divan while a maid applied cold cloths to her forehead and wrists. Occasionally Harold Lock drew a smelling-salts bottle under her nostrils; but each time consciousness was regained, she read the ghastly truth about Ben Greve in the faces about her and fainted away again.

Suddenly, in a hysterical frenzy, she began fighting those who were trying to administer to her, and sprang to the center of the room, shouting that she wanted to be alone. She bounded into the drawing-room and slipped out onto the veranda. No one dared touch her; and she passed through the patio like a frightened hind and disappeared in the lower garden. In a few moments she was seen making her way down the long hill.

CHAPTER XIII

PROTESTING mass meetings and group-gatherings, in connection with the possible close-down of studios, had thrown Anna and Alfred into almost daily companionship. While the general professional situation was showing healthy signs of harmony, their funds had dwindled to a proportion demanding a toast and coffee diet. And now, after pooling most of their silver for delicatessen morsels, they walked into the hills with weary stride, descending into Griffith Park to battle with a Goliath in the form of hunger.

They found the community ovens in a miniature square of oak trees, at a fork in the road between the golf course and riding club. While Alfred fed a fire under the grill with dry branches, Anna ploughed through the dusty leaves with her feet, looking for oviform knots of wood which would reduce to glowing embers. They smiled when their eyes met, but they did not talk. Under a new covenant, no utterance was permitted excepting in reference to the abstract, the beautiful, or the humorous.

Gay tones of laughter echoed through the glade from the stables. Tired riders could be seen dismounting from nervous, foamy steeds, indulging in vigorous calisthenics as they disbanded. A couple, in smart riding attire, cut diagonally across the square toward their car. The girl sniffed her nostrils enviously at the odorous oven.

"Are they lucky!" she exclaimed. "Their dinner is almost ready, and we have so far to go."

Her escort placed an amorous arm about her. "Think you could make coffee smell that good?" he challenged.

The equestrians started to run, kicking a dry leaf along, vieing with one another like Rugby players.

The actors exchanged significant glances, simultaneously realizing that they had been watching the happy pair, but did not mention it. The smoking oven demanded attention. The calescent grill made their faces glow while they watched fat wieners wriggle and sizzle. In an effort to harbor them with a forked stick, Anna got smoke in her eyes, and staggered about blindly, laughing.

" 'Spose where is me!" she cried.

Alfred fanned her face with his hat, then puckered his lips humorously and blew cool air on her lids.

Relieved, Anna's eyes opened with a snap.

"Lookie!" she shouted and pointed.

Not twenty feet distant, a gopher peered out of its hole. For a moment it scanned the surrounding territory of conquest, then descended.

With an indifferent shrug, Alfred indicated a squirrel bounding lightning-like through the foliage.

"Odd," Anna said in an academic tone. "Now they belong to the same general family. One chooses to burrough through the earth, and the other, with less resistance, has more fun in the tree tops."

A wry smile faded over the masculine countenance while he awaited her deduction.

"I think I should like the tree tops," she giggled.

"And now I'm supposed to tell you what sort of squirrel I'd rather be?"

"Correct again."

"I'd like to be a tree-squirrel. I know you'd like to be a tree-squirrel, so I'd like to be a tree-squirrel. Now, how's that?"

"A very pretty speech, darling; but why did you read it as if it were the radio news? Say, did I hear you say you had cigarettes?"

"No; but here they are."

He pulled several from his pocket with the air of a schoolboy showing fishing bait to a pal; but he was actually concentrating upon the word *darling*. She had used it more than once, and something compelled serious thought about it.

His pause was misunderstood for a guilty conscience.

"So you stole them when you sneaked the coffee and pot," she chided.

"I did not! Got the broken pot from my brother-in-law's garage, and the handful of coffee from the kitchen during a pretended romp with my police dog."

Anna giggled. "And the cigarettes?"

"From a grab-box at a poolroom."

"What's a grab-box?"

"A cigar box on a counter. You drop pennies into it and extract a like number of cigarettes."

He began breaking the rolls open for toasting and paused to deliver a poetic flippancy. "What do you think of this, Anna?" He shook his head sadly. "I have the bread and thou; but just what do you think of a guy who has no wine?"

"I think he's a wine guy."

Heads went suddenly into the air like howling dogs, and they sang "Ah—oo!" in pun disapproval.

Their minds being so nearly supported by despair caused them to laugh at the slightest provocation. Refusing to be serious, they stood like soldiers waiting for a command which might insure doom, or as prisoners sustained only by the hope of a governor's pardon. Facing a darker night than they had ever known, the duo fought morbidity with silly puns as weapons.

Only a few coins remained from the timely Stinzel payment; and the conviction that a similar miracle would save them had faded away. Each expected to be locked out of his hotel at any moment—amazed that it had not previously been his lot—inwardly praising the tolerance of any hotel keeper.

Too dark a frown on Alfred's brow caused Anna to blurt out: "Gorgeous!" and point to an aclivity.

A hill silhouetted the western sky. Rose, gold, and flame scintillated before a blue haze striped with narrow ribbons of purple. The descending sun was perpetually changing the contour of mesas of clouds in kaleidoscopic splendor.

"Lambs! Lambs!" Anna insisted in a palpable tussle at being jocular.

Ocean fog was coiling inland over the crown of a low hill which resembled sheep scampering to a corral.

Two buses, loaded with tourists and happy golfers whizzed by in a cloud of dust. Demanding attention from the actors at the oven, the occupants whooped and yelled their jovial greetings, proffering those cavalier gestures a traveler uses so freely from a train window—that generous salute one extends to his fellow when he is sure, in life's span, that he will never see that individual again.

Anna, custodian of the wieners by conquest and

the possession of a forked stick, kept one eye on the grill and one on the road, attempting to satisfy the passengers with jerky, "Lo, folks!" antics.

"Anna, you're going to burn those wieners to a crisp, or they'll slip through the gridiron. Why won't you let me help you?" Opening his pocketknife, he began moving them out of jeopardy. "The game is chess," he clowned. "Check! Your queen's in danger."

Alfred glanced up in response to staccato horntaps from the road.

"Not in a million years could you guess who that is, Anna," he challenged.

"Somehow I know," she returned, a change stealing over her before she looked up. "My God, I'm right! Adolph Kaliz! I'll die if he's brazen enough to intrude. Thank heaven, he's driving on—or is he?"

Quickly she brandished the forked stick over head, hoping that the congenial gesture would satisfy and quell his curiosity. It did; for after replying with an *arpeggio* from toneful horns, the banker shifted gears and sped down the road. Anna dropped her arm in grateful relief, in quite too relaxed a condition. It hit the broken handle of the coffee pot, spilling its contents over the grill. An explosion of steam shot into the air. Smoke enveloped the oven. Instantly the whole was reduced to simmering black coals.

The actors exchanged baleful glances and turned from each other. A vibrating emotion shook Anna's body after which she sank to a tree-root mound and covered her face with her hands. Sporadic moans of anguish cut at the masculine heart, causing him to hurry to her; but, with no words befitting, he stood patting her shoulder and watching the coffee run down the oven, forming little black pools on the hard earth.

"No! It isn't fair. You mustn't, Anna. Come out of it!" he coaxed.

It became imperative to rewrite tragedy into comedy and he forced a laugh, hoping to infect her. Sensing a hypersensitiveness he feared might lead to destruction, fired him into gesticulatory enthusiasm and mock eloquence.

"The wieners have only had a bath, Anna. We'll wring 'em out. Don't you like drained wieners, clean wieners?"

"But just look at the poor wilted buns!"

"They'll be okay. We'll toast hell out of 'em! Why, they'll be coffee eclairs. Don't you like coffee eclairs?" He tweaked her nose. "Say you like coffee eclairs."

"If you say coffee eclairs again, I'll scream!"

"Coffee eclairs."

"Darling! Don't!"

Pliantly he moved away to take inventory of the remains at the grill, and tried to attract her

attention by practising plastic surgery upon the buns.

But Anna would not relent. A turmoil of bitterness was numbing her senses. The mishap had presented itself as a concluding symbol. "That's the last time I'll ever see that man on earth!" she hissed, and bit into her lip as if sealing the conviction.

"Don't get that way!" Alfred ridiculed blithely. "Why, there's liable to be a slip of the wiener in the best of families. How do you want your caviar, toots?"

"I'm not bitter," she lied. "I've just made a decision is all."

Ignoring her inference, he placed his own interpretation upon it with: "Thata girl!" but the strength of her declaration bothered him and he listened more carefully without seeming to.

"Something very prophetic has presented itself," he heard her mutter. "Something that makes all this remind me of *The Last Supper.*"

Sensing that his remarks roiled her, Alfred concentrated his attention upon the grill, rescued all the wieners and got the fire under control.

The sharp tooth of despair cut Anna to the core. It was no surprise to her. She had experienced previous shocks, but had never felt such an accumulation of poison from its mordent bite.

"A premonition," her lips kept forming while she gazed out over the golf course.

The happy stragglers on the beautiful lanes of green presented a colorful picture, entirely contrasting her life, she thought. Hers was drab with a monotonous flow of meaningless, mechanical routine, like dull wallpaper throughout a house bearing the same pattern, with no hope of renewal. Further endurance was impossible. She meant to arrange an immediate surcease.

When Alfred at last turned to apprise her of his success, he met an expression that electrified him. She sat staring a million miles away, through glassy eyes, in a bent-over position like a mourner. Her pure-white face possessed no color contrast, and the wide-open eyes gave her the artificial look of a wax figure.

"Anna," he said softly to conceal his anxiety. "Anna, look out of your beautiful eyes and see the resurrection."

He moved back and forth in front of her, as if searching for wood, hoping to break the spell of her fixed gaze gently. Her body responded with successive quivers when he placed his hand on her shoulder. With a feeble effort at being jocular, he bowed in the manner of a *courtier* ready to take a figure for a *cotillon,* and extended his arm.

She followed with the unresistance of the insane, making no comment when he pointed with pride to the crisp wieners, now a little darker in color and withered like pickles. When all his fun

regarding the watered meal failed, he served her in silence, patiently awaiting the time when she would care to talk.

"I have a few coins left," he said when they had finished. "I think you'd better have some coffee."

They walked down a lane to the golf lunch-counter. Alfred acted as though he did not like coffee.

"Trying to save money?" she asked. "You may have my portion. I'll not be needing it."

He smiled with infinite sadness and compassion. She patted his hand; and when the grouchy waiter was busy with his dishes, forced Alfred to take occasional sips from her cup. Afterward, they took chairs outside in a rustic garden and watched the damp fog undulate like a surging sea which, loom-like, fed an invisible shuttle that diapered ominous patterns across the crater parts of the fairways.

When she finally decided to converse, the subject of her intercourse was unsurprising to Alfred; but her independence was. She quickly relieved him of any doubt as to her sincerity; and when convinced that she had covered every detail, with nothing more to state, she turned coldly toward him and said:

"*Finis!*"

None of his arguments had any effect. The snake-like subtlety of her futility had penetrated the veneer of his philosophy. An atmosphere of de-

pression enveloped him. In this semi-hypnotic state, he unconsciously acquiesced.

During the walk home they made plans, parting a block from Anna's hotel. She called to him and he retraced his steps.

"How much money did you say was left?" she asked without reason.

"Forty cents and four pennies. Why?"

"Nothing. If I find that I'm locked out, you may meet me in front by the gold-fish pond."

Alfred went to a drug store as he had promised; and on the way back, purchased six red, short-stemmed roses. He was grateful when he did not find Anna outside the building, and hurried up to her room. Faint mutterings met his ears as he emerged from the elevator at the seventh floor, and he flung the door to find her on the floor, sobbing a "good-by" to the Pekingese. She cried a little more when he presented the roses with the ambiguous warning:

"Flowers for the living."

He put his arm about her, for the first time. It was a gesture of protest which she resented, and pushed it away. A feeling of tension entered the room.

While rummaging in a drawer for a fresh handkerchief, Anna found his. "Well, well," she mumbled hoarsely, "the one you lent me in George Stinzel's car. Since you won't be needing it, I'll use it

again; but not for luck. That's something which seems to have passed us by."

An outburst of artificial laughter annoyed and her erratic actions worried him. Alfred took a chair in a corner, toyed with his hat and watched her through the tail of his eye.

"I'll put these on our grave," she said sepulchrally, throwing the roses upon the bed.

One fell to the floor. After retrieving it, Anna stood inhaling its fragrance for an incredible time, gazing at it as if listening for some message it carried.

Memory recalled Ophelia's mad scene to Alfred. "*O, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown! . . . And I, of ladies most deject and wretched,*" were speeches which kept hammering for acceptance in Anna's case. Logically he felt like a Hamlet toward her, he told himself. "*Go to, I'll no more on't; it hath made me mad,*" he could easily quote; and like the Prince of Denmark, tell her: "*To a nunnery, go.*" She had never prompted the smallest impulse of love in him. . . . What was all this he was thinking? Doubt concerning his own mental condition bothered him for the first time; and he felt relieved when he saw Anna sit at her writing-desk to compose a note.

"In the bathroom," he heard her direct in tones as sweet as she had ever used, "you'll find the dog's basket. Bring the cloth covering."

A howling protest began as the Pekingese noted the removal of its bed, and she ran to her mistress' feet to continue it.

Anna rose to place the note in Alfred's pocket, and said: "*Finis!*"

The word barbed Alfred. He had grown to hate it. Without reply, he took the basket and hurried out, in order to pass through the lobby alone, as she instructed. As discretion dictated, Anna joined him on the sidewalk and placed the Pekingese on leash.

"I avoided the clerk," she whispered, "but I saw what looked like an eviction document hovering in my mail box. However, I don't think they'll bother until morning."

The word *morning* caused silence. To outward appearances, they moved along leisurely, out on a short jaunt for the fresh air.

A great change had come over the face of the night in Alfred's estimation. The sky had a sullen, slate cast. The trees were as still as make-believe scenery. The atmosphere was oppressive with the feeling of a vacuum, as in the after-sensation of violent thunder. Everything seemed dead. Weird light-streaks shot out between rows of trees, distorting his shadow, mingling distastefully mysterious with the sandpaper slip of his shoes on the cement. The rhythm of the night was unfriendly. Everything was saying *farewell.*

"Alfred," Anna blurted out suddenly, "do you believe that we go on after death?"

"I'm sure of it," he answered quickly enough to startle her. A moment later, he added: "That's what worries me."

She took a few steps before speaking.

"What do you mean, this that worries you?"

"The idea of self-destruction. Life goes on; it doesn't stop."

"The idea of trying to live seems a far greater worry."

"So it seems. That's the numbing influence."

Impulsively, Anna picked the dog up to cuddle it; and with crying tones in her voice, pleaded: "Talk to me. I don't mind if you theorize. In fact, I must know what you think."

After a moment's silence, he cleared his throat and began unwillingly.

"I've been able to read a great deal during my idleness," he said in explanation. "Thanks for the possession of a library card, I've been able to cover volumes. A line or two from a present-day master engrossed me to the extent that I memorized it. Interested? Here it is: 'I have proved that I am a mental being, that is, a mentality or consciousness with a visible portion called body. I am mentality that can think and the body is the objective state of myself.' "

"Go on, help me to grasp the meaning."

"It's supposed to prove that each individual is power itself."

"Oh."

"Everything I've perused convinces me that disintegration of the body does not mean total annihilation; that the *you* of you cannot be destroyed. I certainly won't believe that life begins with protoplasm and ends with a handful of dust. It should prove something when one learns that the form of *matter* may be changed, but never becomes nonexistent."

"Yes. It seems as if it should."

"Still, I can't understand this struggle that confronts me in trying to keep the body animated. So I get all mixed up with the process of my reasoning. Bread, being the staff of life, must have an interpretation that I can't fathom."

"Yes, Alfred."

"The reincarnationist answers the riddle of life with some satisfaction. His belief implies that all earth-life is waiting in the anteroom of eternity; that all the powers one possesses are the sum total of past achievement before birth in this existence of which he is cognizant—and that the dead are as much in school as the living."

The discourse ended in meditation.

Past, present, future, Anna pondered. Yes, events were ever arranging themselves in such order. Even the few blocks of their walk had now faded into

memory. What were they to behold tomorrow, after passing through the door they intended opening tonight?

A frightful enervation rendered her breathless. Necessity compelled Anna to marshal all her forces in order to compose dulcet speech, but when her mouth opened, it said: "Well, Alfred, we go dog-walking again;" and asked how recently he had seen his police dog. Her hand went over her lips in regret, and she felt grateful when his answer was pleasant.

"Most every day. The dog likes it better when I make a night call. So do I. Evidently he knows my approach; he never barks. I sneak in and out over the hedge, and he thinks I'm playing." After a few paces, he assured: "There's no friend like a dog."

Sympathy welled up in Anna's bosom.

Poor boy, she thought. He didn't have as many friends as she. A rapid enumeration caused her to conclude that only Signor Florenzo and Edna Allar could be enclosed in that sacred circle. She had never been actually attached to Audrey Berkin.

Instantly mired in compassion, it took the utmost effort to expunge from mind the profound mourning with which Audrey was recognizing the tragic loss of Ben Greve.

"Isn't this the Allar court we're approaching?" Alfred whispered.

"Yes. Let's walk along the curbing to shield our actions."

"There's a dim light upstairs."

"I know. But I telephoned Edna. She told me that she and her mother had called it a day. They won't open the front door until they look for the morning paper."

When Anna began hugging and kissing the Pekingese, Alfred withdrew a few steps to free himself from her emotion. He soon absorbed himself by watching a single light far out over the roofs and chimney pots of bungalows. Not since he was a little boy had he looked at light in such a manner, allowing refractions to make rainbow effects upon his lashes—years ago, when he first stood in awe of light, long before he knew the meaning of the word or recognized the phenomena.

Later, water also commanded a similar reverential respect. For, not long since, he had stood by the ocean with a petition on his lips, and a conviction in his heart that if God could create a bulk so massive, move it with chaos and calm it into harmony, then *bread* must be unimportant.

Yes, there certainly was a secret to life, he told himself for the last time. Perhaps a secret so simple that millions of people, taking the earthly excursion, had overlooked its principle—never conscious that there was a principle—passing on like circus yokels too attracted by side-show barkers to find the

box-office window in order to obtain tickets for the Big Show.

He appreciated having had a few minutes alone. All resentment and bitterness had vanished now, while shortly before he had felt like Samson, desiring to pull down the universe in an attempt to end the human scheme.

A soft whisper disturbed his reverie.

"Darling, the note in your pocket?" Anna requested.

It surprised him to find her calm, deliberately entombing the dog, winding the cloth about the basket as if it were a Christmas gift.

Alfred took the basket and strolled casually past the house. When certain that no one was watching, he retraced his steps, placed the dog at Edna's door, and joined Anna again in the shadows.

They were extremely introspective on the way back, hardly joining two words together. Bridges were being burned behind. No money for another meal caused each to wonder if he might not breakfast in some sphere above the trees—in some less difficult world, beyond the possible hurt of the personal plane.

A block from the hotel, Anna extended her key, whispering: "I want you to pass through the lobby before my entrance"; and to kill time, sauntered back around the corner.

Experiencing an acute attack of monophobia,

she stopped on the curbing under a lamp, dulled by corner dust, and found occupation in counting streaks the fog was creating on its globe. She sensed relief on sighting the lights from an approaching car.

Two boys cruised by in a roadster. Gears ground, tires slid, the car moved back in front of Anna. The driver lifted his voice above the noisy motor to evidence his rapacious appetite with an air of rioting debauchery. Not to be outdone, his youthful companion unfurled the inference with more clarity in an idiotic attempt at sophistication.

Frustrated by her thoughts on the wild aspect of tomorrow, it took a moment or two for Anna to comprehend the harsh assault.

"Make it snappy, sister!" the driver belched. "Ride or no ride? How 'bout a quick decision? Goin' our way?"

Anna relaxed with the sad look of a disappointed mother, and in tones that comprised pity for all humanity, returned magnificently: "I've made my decision; I'm going the other way."

A violent jerk sent the car forward. A rancorous laugh ended with: "Why didn't you tell 'er you could get 'er in pictures?" and died, as it should have, in exhaust explosions.

Wounded, like a bird that seeks the protection of a thicket, Anna turned her steps toward the hotel.

CHAPTER XIV

ANNA SUCCEEDED in getting across the lobby surreptitiously, unseen by the clerk, and to avoid using the elevator, walked up the seven flights of stairs. She found Alfred moodily abstracted in a chair by her window, his hat still on, frowning out into space. With assumed composure, she dropped into a chair; but immediately succumbed to a similar picture of dejection by gazing at the dressing-table clock, as if it were her cup of distaste, while existence chanted on in wailing minor.

Presently Alfred turned his head toward her and said satirically: " I guess this must be a silence strike."

When she did not respond, he watched her mouth, as delicate as a seismograph, recording the successive quakes from within. Absently he lit a cigarette, but after a single draw, mashed it in the tray, expelling the smoke intermingled with a profound sigh. His head sought the chair-back. His

tired eyes closed. The stillness wafted him into fancy.

Like Jacob, he had a ladder-dream; but his was not of Heaven nor of angels. He saw the world as a huge globe pendant in the clouds, with a rope ladder hanging to the under part. From his promontory view, he witnessed self-condemned men descending the ladder, forced to drop from the bottom rung into space as punishment for earthly failure; saw their bodies careen, twist, hinge together and then collapse, dissolving into the nothingness of oblivion—all but the eyes which reappeared from the disembodied—compelled to circle roundabout the earth, invisible to their human brothers, to watch with cankerfret and anguish, the opportunity they had abandoned.

The dressing-table clock ticked on mournfully.

"I wonder who will bury us?" Anna asked in a tremulous voice.

The question being answerless, she whipped her mind to drown the admission, with her gaze fixed on an intricate pattern in the rug which she traced in detail with the toe of her slipper.

Mixing strangely with his dream, the query began to jounce in Alfred's mind. His eyes opened with a snap as the truth dawned. True, they would not be received in respected ground. No crypt or canopic jars would hold their residue, nor would any tombstone mark their resting place.

Reflex action brought him quickly to his feet. Feeling himself in the presence of forces he could not comprehend, he began pacing the floor, as if retreating from his thoughts. A furtive glance into a mirror stopped the panther strides for a scrutiny of his appearance; then, as if admonished, he removed his disheveled hat and tossed it into his chair.

Deep in thought, with furrowed brow, he stood like a criminal attorney weighing evidence. This was a beginning where no end might be foreseen and required deliberation. "Perhaps a new trial?" an invisible judge seemed to sanction. Desultory thoughts digested nothing but a few unintelligible sounds for his dry throat, and he was forced to demur. Resuming his seat, he mashed his hat.

A vicious tug brought the crushed mass out before him. He wondered just why he did not laugh. People always laughed at that. While smoothing out the wrinkles, the stillness told him that he would have no further need of a hat and he dropped it on the floor; then, hardly conceiving the elapsed time, he replied with the same tonal apathy that she had used:

"Worrying about burial is silly."

"Of course. No one will care to locate my grave."

With a sigh, she recalled a quotation which vexed him.

"Your philosopher friend didn't coin every-

thing!" he snapped. "That's been said before."

"That's a surly speech, darling. Quite true. Everything's been said before. The important thing is that I've never heard you speak so bitterly."

"Sorry. We're certainly starting on our voyage morbidly enough. Perhaps it's an omen warning us against a leaky ship."

His sigh expressed the hopeless folly of further utterance.

After a brooding moment, Anna rallied maternally. "I see consolation," she outlined. "There'll be no more wrinkled stomachs while waiting for decisions from the arrogant. There'll be no more lethargy,no more faineant days that wrack the soul; and no more sleepless nights, longing for a morning message of cheer."

Unconscious of her own bitterness, she was thinking aloud.

"I know I'm sick of it all, Alfred. Try as I may, I can't change my attitude. 'Life is real! Life is earnest!' may be an enthusiastic slogan for the opulent; but the real part, if any, is to be, do, and have what you want; although I'm past that desire now. I don't want to go on because I don't like anything about this existence. The whole scope of it is infantile. Having to eat is disgusting. Sleeping the same. Propagation is preposterous. The mere thought of bringing a soul into the world to follow in my wake is appalling."

Their eyes met for several seconds.

"Our bodies have to be discarded sometime," Anna began again with more vehemence. "Why prolong the agony? Only the weak in spirit will accept misery in this world in hope of bliss in the next. I'm weak physically. I'm tired! Oh, very, very tired; and when you're tired you don't care any more, do you? I'm tired of this fiction people call *life!*"

"That sums it up, Anna. There's nothing more to say."

A constraint fell upon their conversation.

Alfred sat thinking of all the things he could add if he had the energy, but an increasing fatigue made it impossible. Far out of the window, he scanned part of Hollywood, askew on the sides of hills. The blinking lights of another portion mocked him. The radio tower on the Warner Brothers' Studios stood out prominently with sparkling incandescents, like diamonds scattered on black velvet in a jeweler's window. Hollywood's Eiffel Tower, he thought ironically. The huge sums spent on advertisement cankered in his soul. Thrifty advice on an illuminated billboard irked him; and Neon flashes atop a bank made him wonder if money was not the cross on which the age was crucified.

"Yes," he grumbled, as if he had been talking continually. "That sums it up."

"Right!" Anna used his expression emphatically. "You see, my agent said he'd telephone. He didn't; and I don't think he will. Aren't agents terrible? No, I don't mean that, but . . . Oh, it's nothing but destiny! Aren't you resigned to that?"

His suspicious attitude caused her to study him a moment before speaking.

"Alfred, listen to me. Did I force you into a decision because I had made one?"

"No."

"Say something besides *no*."

Without moving, he talked over his shoulder.

"I resigned some time ago," he recalled, "the night I met you. Up to that time I had no interest in anything. Somehow you started one. I've been interested in you ever since. Thinking of you has obliterated my own problems, if you can accept that sort of compliment."

"Nice of you," she said passively.

"Not at all. I feel sorry enough for myself, but when I think of girls like you battling an invisible enemy, it has me stopped."

"You wouldn't say one thing and mean another, would you?"

"No. Why pretend?"

He turned to scrutinize her. With drooped head, she was occupied in folding and squaring his large handkerchief upon her lap. Unconsciously, he got entangled in a self-abusive lecture, decided that he

could no longer express himself, and sat morose and introspective.

"Darling, what are you trying to divulge? Will you share your thoughts with me?"

Crossing the room, she drew a chair very near to him, a half-smile of splendid tolerance pervading her features.

That meaningless expression *darling* again, he resented. Why should she use it? He was ready to re-tell himself that he held no sentimental regard for her when, like a thunderbolt, the great bell of clarity vibrated the truth: his penniless condition had been the daily stumbling block. Their Suicide Pact had eliminated every problem now. They stood free, emerging from the murmuring woods of worldly accusations into a great peaceful meadow.

She appeared as delicate as a seashell. The faint smile at her alluring lips revealed teeth strung like pearls. Her eyes were sparkling gems. When he closed his, an impression in miniature swam in and out of his mind and the picture remained on his eyelids. In that moment, he knew that he would carry that impression with him into eternity; and in a lightning chain of thought, he pictured things as they might have been, with the elimination of that multi-circumstantial word called *if*.

Widening his eyes, he took in the reality.

"Ann," he said and repeated it; for he realized that it was the first time he had ever abbreviated

her name. "My dear Ann, I don't know what could be the matter with a man who would prefer death to you."

Ensuing stillness made the ticking clock seem loud.

She listened patiently while he abused himself as a shiftless, spineless creature—a lackwit, with earning-power comparable to an invalid.

"Darling!" she broke in.

Her intentions were good. She intended to quell the hurt, masculine pride with an answer to the chronic question of all humanity in one breath. Hesitation after the single word proved that she, as all struggling sisters before her, had failed in forming anything conciliatory.

Instantly she rallied with phrases synonymous.

"My darling, we haven't anything to do with it. We're started and numbed. We're as confused as those who attempted building the Tower of Babel. Tell me what there is to do—that's just it—when there's nothing to do? What comparison shall I draw? Money seems to be the biotic principal of life. We're not ignorant, we're bewildered! We're as bewildered as children who can't realize why they're being punished."

Little exasperated quivers about her mouth suggested that it was ready to pronounce what did not arrive. Finding continuity, she carried on.

"There's no alternative," she pointed out. "It's

futile! To me, it's as silly as postponing the extraction of a tooth because some friend has promised to hold your hand. I've tried very hard, but I don't seem able to explain with parable, simile, or absurdity the extent of my complete attitude. I don't see. . . . That's it!" she concluded forcefully. "I can't see any further through the black!"

Her hands wrung in little jerks. He extended one of his to still them, then experienced a startling sensation; the strangest he had ever known surged through him.

For an evanescent moment they stared into one another's face, like children at night too alarmed to cry; but the mood changed rapidly to the bravado grown-ups have learned to flaunt when facing more appalling danger. And so Alfred thumbed his mental diary for an aphorism, a grown-up speech. When it arrived, it was dramatic and he read it so:

"Then we'll plumb the universe together?"

She nodded childlike, and said: "Yes," with a grown-up tone. "Let's not be afraid," she added as the mature tendency predominated.

Much calmer now, Anna's finger tips ran across and back over his large knuckles, consolingly while she talked.

"I understand you thoroughly," she assured, using little hand pats to emphasize. "I'd like a little more womanly pride in me, but I haven't known just what to do about it. As you said, we've been

fighting something that we couldn't see, couldn't take hold of. It reminds me of something I read about the World War. As if appealing to the very country as a jury, a Russian Cossack asked: 'My comrades can fight anything they can see; but when mysterious shells of steel are hurled miles to mow us down, what should we do?' "

Quickly visualizing his life sprinkled over the waste of years, Alfred nodded, recognizing her parallelism.

"That's that," he said in conclusion.

The slang acted as an impressive seal, waxing approval upon their contemplated sojourn.

"I want . . . You see," Anna stammered, stopped and began again, surprised to find herself unafraid to voice what had flashed into her mind. "I want to be with you in the next world," she breathed sincerely, "for somehow I feel that we don't belong in this one."

She relaxed, as if viewing some peaceful transfiguration through a mental lane never before explored.

The masculine eyes dilated. Alfred felt as if he had been aroused from stupor, saved from the agony of a bad dream. Studying her profile, he saw the mist of tender affection in her eyes, sensed a new relationship between them which he did not pretend to understand, which was thorough compensation for her former austerity. Her presence

seemed to reach out and embrace him. Extending his hand, he raised her chin with his palm. Then she spoiled his thrill, and proved that all her sentiment had been pretense by asking:

"Will you show me what you bought at the drug store?"

She took a quick breath; and like one fascinated by that which he hardly dares look upon, he allowed her eyes to travel in jerks toward the small box he had extracted. Hypnotized, she counted ten white pellets before she could free her gaze.

The table clock played an ear-splitting tattoo, while the gloomy silence viced them in the nothingness in which they were imprisoned.

Anna struggled for exotic conversation, but the fatal-looking tablets held her like a banshee, unconsciously asking the nature of the poison.

"It isn't poison. They are sleeping pellets. Double strength. Didn't you notice the directions of caution?"

She mumbled her ignorance.

"We merely take too many at one time," he prescribed.

"Then sleep?"

"Yes. 'The sleep that knows no waking,' " he quoted, using the grown-up tones.

Silence allowed the clock to annoy. A helpless noise sounded in Anna's throat.

"What?" he asked.

"Nothing, my darling."

"Oh."

In all the world there was no sound.

"There'll be no pain," Alfred managed to diagnose like a doctor.

He patted her hand and felt the poignant flutter of her pulse, then wondered if it might not be his own.

"Oh, let's say what we think, and courageously do what we have to do when the time comes," Anna said in rebuke, too vehement to be convincing. "What hour shall we set? You see, my agent hasn't called. Shall we give him until midnight? My-my, that sounds dramatic, wouldn't you say?" she characterized in what she thought to be a flippant voice.

"Midnight used to be a dramatic hour," Alfred sneered. "Now it's only the time for another drink."

A sincere pout puckered Anna's mouth. "I'd feel a lot better if I had a drink."

An impulse sent Anna to her dressing-table. With a frightened, comatose gesture, she turned the clock face down, muffling it with a heavy scarf. Then despondency engulfed her. She sat, throwing her arms out across the table, allowing her body to relax upon them, fighting against the beast of anguish, and felt her veins grow cold.

Minutes passed.

"Damned rug pattern!" Anna grumbled unawares.

Through the crutch of her arm, her eyes had been following a design that ran, like her own life, circular to no end. Moving her body to block it out, her gaze fell upon the hall door. Who would be the next person through it? After a moment's speculation, she said aloud:

"I wonder who will find us in the morning?"

The idea found fertile soil in Alfred's mind. Like a dramatist, he visioned all adjacent action in connection with their suicide, the continuity of which ran analogous to a murder-mystery story. The opposite wall began to hold him like a motion-picture screen while the drama of their end unreeled in perfect sequence.

He saw the morning entrance of the maid; saw her stumble through the dark room to draw the curtains; saw her turn and stand horror-stricken at the sight of their prostrate bodies. After managing a blood-curdling scream, she darted into the hall to inform the housekeeper.

The clerk was enlightened. The manager called the police. The inspector arrived with the coroner. Photographers elbowed their way through the curious crowd at the hall door, vieing with one another for the best camera set-ups. Flash-lights popped. Newspaper and magazine reporters . . . No, no, no! Alfred's mind cried, stopping further projection.

Low mumbling met his ears; and a hurried glance informed him that Anna had evidently been talking on and on, without looking up, or expecting a reply. He listened carefully.

" . . . of course, which all reminds me of that actor in the play: *Dinner at Eight,* who had to arrange himself properly before suicide so that his body would be found in a dignified position. To me, it's all a lot of . . . "

Sensing his gaze upon her, she turned to meet an expression which at once caused her heart to skip a beat.

"Anna!" she heard him shout as if from a distance.

An interminable hush shot paroxysms of fear through her.

"Try to understand me," he began cautiously. "How awful! How stupid of me not to have thought of it before! I can't be found here."

The idea struck her as the warning whir of a snake, and she waited a breathless moment to decipher his statement thoroughly.

"What are you saying?" she managed through white lips.

Infusing his voice with gentle tones, Alfred said: "You do, don't you dear, understand what I mean?"

Anna's flesh shrank, her face darkened, her head shook "yes" while trying to make him understand that she meant "no." I'll be brave; I'll be calm.

Trust me? her expression said; but suddenly, like an echo, a hoarse whisper passed her lips.

"What are you trying to tell me?" she murmured, and when strength came, cried: "You wouldn't leave me!"

Pressed for explanations, Alfred rushed to her, sank to one knee, and compelled her with his eyes while he explained the reflection such a discovery would cast upon her character.

"But I won't be here to care!" she solved quickly.

He shook her shoulders.

"Anna, listen to me!"

With forceful words, he described the sinuous path of calumny, outlined the George Stinzel story, horribly warped by newsmongers, and recalled other Hollywood tragedies where truth had been cut to proper burning length for fiction's altar.

His arguments addled her, but she remained adamant beyond persuasion. To her, there was no reason for dread. Only the living were fearful. What if babbling gossipers did malign her after departure? It was their business; something which they would have to account for hereafter. One couldn't force the Golden Rule upon the copper-minded. Compensation's law attended to such matters. "At the devil's booth all things are sold."

"But, Anna, if you've ascribed to all the tenets of convention while living, why, on turning the last

page, should there by any reason for throwing ink at it?"

She drew closer to him, like a child trying to explain its fear-world to a parent while forced to listen to words of correction. Overtoning the ringing in her head, portions of his logic sounded clear.

" . . . crucified, according to the ways of this world."

"I'll not listen, Alfred!"

She cupped her ears with her palms. He freed them.

"Anna! You've lived with a principle, don't spoil it at what we call *the end.*"

"Not alone!" she cried through ashen lips. "Not alone!"

This was not like the fear concerning tomorrow's keep, she meant to say. This was as entering a deep, dark cave, on an expedition the experiment of which all advised against. At length, she sobbed:

"Oh, why didn't we decide to jump off of some pier, Alfred, then no one would have bothered?"

Halcyon repose was what Alfred desired, but which he felt unattainable without a *visé* from his own conscience, clearing him from any earthly injustice before departure. Such precaution might forestall a detour to Erebus, or prevent disaster in crossing the River Styx.

"Anna, I've never been a religious man, but no doubt I'll try to form some sort of prayer tonight.

Perhaps religion and philosophy are one and the same. We'll know tomorrow, won't we? Won't you try . . . "

"What can I say when the heart is too full for utterance?" she moaned.

"What can I say when the utterance is too full for the heart?"

She felt at a disadvantage, with everything she stated maladroitly expressed. Obviously there were only two courses; alone, or banish the idea entirely. But a loathsome army of tomorrow's problems trooped by in review; and, in desperation, she was compelled to expunge the ghastly *cortège* by voicing what she did not mean to relate:

"I wanted to hold your hand when we . . . "

A choke finished the sentence. She bit her lip and closed her eyes. When she opened them, things were more in focus. With breathy aspirations, she said:

"It takes strength . . . "

Verbal failure caused her to move away. Concealing her emotion, she leaned against the closet door with her back to him.

Within the closet, Alfred could see frocks suspended over delicate-looking sandals. "They will never grace her figure again," a fiend whispered in his ear. Alfred shifted his gaze and sank to a chair by the dressing-table. He traced a design in the residue of powder on the glass top, and gave the

atomizer bulb a squeeze to inhale the perfume he had unconsciously learned to love—the odor of a flower garden after a rain.

Somewhat collected, Anna returned to the table, powdered her face, touched each cheek with a bit of rouge and spoiled the whole effect by starting to weep again. Her hands fell helplessly to her lap, allowing the tears to flow unchecked.

"Strength," he heard her mutter between faint sobs.

"Please, Anna?"

"It does? It takes strength. The impulse of a moment might force one into such an act to dodge some penalty—but we are not malefactors!"

With a stubborn attempt at courage, Anna removed the scarf and set the clock upright again. It became the object of focus while a half-hour passed. Far beyond its sinister face, each visualized a place where no time was, where past distress might be washed clean, and ingrown, earthly fears forgotten.

At length Anna rose to pace the floor. Occasionally she said: "Well," with strength, seeming ready to pronounce their benediction; but each time left the statement unexpressed. In turning by the window, she saw his mashed hat, picked it up and thumbed out the wrinkles while she walked.

"This is a *good-by* I can't seem to utter, Alfred. My throat stops up when I think of a parting

phrase; and if I picture you passing out of that door, why . . . "

Her eyes went heavenward, finishing the sentence.

Equally bereft of words, Alfred rose and stood like one who has been dismissed from a woman's presence through some offense that never could be rectified. Thoughts hammered at his brain like wireless signals as he felt himself a receiving station for messages from the past and messages from the future which he could not as yet interpret.

"I wonder how many times I have played this scene of holding the lover's hat." Anna's head shook sadly. "Never with more emotional depth, I'm sure, nor less repression."

Numbed by remorse, Alfred began hating the moral preachment in which he had indulged. He was now self-condemned to his lonely room, with a trained imagination that would be no panacea for the trepidation in viewing taunting phantom shapes that would animate with newly-formed eyes to watch his demision—with nothing on which to rest a vacillating mind but the infinite sea of tomorrow. And there could be no consolation for an apostate. A tingling sensation culminated in weakness, increasing his heart action; and though it pounded with fear, he knew now that it actually throbbed for her.

"Anna, you take the heart out of me," he finally

managed; "and you've been the only heart I've had since I met you."

"And you . . . "

Controlling her quivering lips, she breathed words that astonished him. "Darling," she finished her confession, "if it's true that one is a part of all he's met, then I'm a part of you."

Breathless moments passed. Unfinished phrases were understood long before each choke terminated them.

"I'm ready to go. I think I have the courage now," he said at last. "I'll need something to think about when I'm in my lonely room. If you'll kiss me, I'll think of nothing else."

Her thin young arms went up about his neck and she gathered him in with all her strength. It was the embrace of eternity.

CHAPTER XV

AWAKENED from the palace of his dreams, Alfred felt enthralled when Anna at last pronounced their benediction and moved to the door with him. Conscious of her as an integral part of himself, the room suddenly became a powerful magnet; his hand refused to reach for the door-knob. Instant telepathic reception caused each to seek the other's arms, and they tried to grow together in the distillation of one last kiss.

"Good-byes are difficult enough to tender a loved one who departs but for a short sojourn"—at which time meaningless expressions are profuse until the carrier causes separation by moving onward—but this was different. This was a journey "from whose bourn no traveller returns" which "puzzles the will."

Words, words, words, volumes to impart with no words applicable. Adversity had wedded them and, in its fumbling, elevated the union above the confusion of the past to speechless rapture.

Few there are, who trod this earth, find oneness.

Most mortals are comparable to that ephemeral species of white butterfly that flies zigzag all day, seeking its mate; and meeting failure at sunset, falls prostrate to earth, awaiting a transformation which will permit it to seek again in some other sphere.

Eager to live a longer span, and sensing it impossible, brought beads of anguish to Alfred's brow. She lay in the cradle of his arms and he rocked her gently.

"I know that we have lived before," Anna consoled in her nescience; "and I know that we shall live again. In fact, I expect nothing but a moment's passing in the transition."

Like prisoners behind distasteful bars, each felt certain of release, possessing the instinct a fly must have that sees its freedom through a window pane.

Alfred's mind argued bitterly against the silly machinery of life. What could be the norm for such a functionless pageantry of phantom shapes through the kingdom of time and place, where place never dovetails with time? Time, that fiendish, mocking whirligig that had manipulated him so unmercifully, lifting him from the oblivion of yesterday, and sentencing him to death just when he had learned to be most alive. He ran his finger tips about the delicate molding of her face, combing back little wisps of hair from her brow, mumbling unfinished phrases.

A low sob from Anna's throat viced his heart.

He saw the small pearl of one tear in the canthi of her eyes. Not daring to release the precious last embrace, he pulled at his scarf and, with its silken tip, absorbed the last tears to be shed for mundane grief. In the nimbus, the hush, the ethereality of thought, Alfred asked forgiveness for their contemplated blasphemy, and the privilege of his present heaven.

Presently they relaxed to gaze questioningly at one another, easily sensing that each had indulged in the same supplication. Anna's eyes were washed clear now. Not the laughing eyes that he had glimpsed occasionally during effervescent moments, Alfred surmised, although he was aware that she was attempting to infuse them with life for him. They began breathing more easily. With clasped hands, they stood lacing and unlacing fingers, as lovers do before marriage; Anna, as if quite fearful of a parent's reprimand, Alfred, like a suitor who has been reminded of purple dawn.

"Telephone me as soon as you get home?" Anna charged.

"Of course."

"The very minute?"

"The very minute."

Alfred divided the sleeping tablets, patted her cheek, thought: Bitter sweet, left the *bitter* part forever unexpressed, said: "Sweet," and closed her door quickly behind him.

The penetrating power of his presence remained in the room with Anna like the dominant chords of exotic music. She began humming to sustain them and, for occupation, foraged in her trunk to find long-forgotten trinkets. After selecting her best night robe, she creamed her face as if contemplating a night's rest, then removed it and made-up as if preparing to be escorted to a very important place.

She appeared more than ever like the demented Ophelia when she climbed into bed and arranged the roses over the mound her form made; then the rising curtain of her mind revealed a new tableau of Alfred, changing her resemblance to the calculating Juliet. Was Alfred perfidious? Perhaps he wouldn't telephone at all. Perhaps his attitude was pertinent enough to apprise her that he no longer recognized their Pact.

She sat upright, staring at nothing. Her blood cooled rapidly. Lightning thoughts of doubt demanded acceptance. While some of her reasoning partly exonerated him, like Juliet, she questioned the drug and the sincerity of her Romeo.

Alfred walked briskly through the night, endeavoring not to think, hoping to exhaust himself in order to nourish sleep desire. His nervous fingers contacted several coins in his pocket and he entered

an all-night market to ask how much dog meat four pennies would buy.

The sleepy-eyed clerk relaxed a sullen countenance. Man's best companion had made instant friends of strangers. Eagerly the servitor expounded his knowledge of the canine family while wrapping a huge meaty bone especially recommended for teeth-sharpening.

Subsequently, in his room, Alfred donned his pajamas and sat at his writing-desk. Contrary to his reckoning, his last message flowed as spontaneously as if he had previously memorized it. Long after its completion, he was aroused by the echo of laughter and realized that he had been gazing out into the hotel court, and felt pleased with himself; he had counted no windows. Obtaining the desk operator, he asked the hour.

"Um—nine little minutes to twelve, Mr. Garey. An' am I sick of this ol' night job. Are you complainin' about the noise on the top floor?"

"No, Helen. I hadn't noticed it. Just wanted to leave a call for—say eight a. m."

"Out early? You must be goin' somewhere."

"Why . . . Why, yes, I am."

"Workin' again, eh? Goin' on location? That's swell!"

"Yes, that's it. If the telephone shouldn't arouse

me in the morning, will you have the boy bounce up and bang on my door? Thanks."

"Wish you'd let me go with you, Mr. Garey. I'd sure like to take a crack at pictures. . . . Oh, please forgive that! I get lonesome on this ol' night job. You know, forget my bringin' up an' all that. But, hi, ho, you get fed-up with everythin' once in a while, now ain't that the truth?"

"I'm afraid it is."

"Sorry for detainin' you."

"Not at all, Helen. Good-by . . . I mean *good-night.*"

He sat in meditation, inhaling the rose Anna had given him, which brought the hairpin amulet to mind. Obtaining it, he secured the rose to his pajama coat.

A heavy knock disturbed him. "Come in," Alfred responded, remembered the door was locked, and crossed the room. He swung the door, nodding to a strange youth who wobbled in a delightful state of inebriation.

"I'm—I'm Alf Ross from across the hall," the boy stammered. "Don't know yuh so well. But something told me to ask yuh if we shouldn't crash that noisy party on the top floor. Serve 'em right for throwin' gin bottles in our court. What say, oakeydoke? Let's palsy-walsy upsie?"

Alfred declined graciously.

The stranger flicked his finger at the rose on Alfred's breast. "Oh, 'nuther engagement? S-sorry," he hiccuped. "Too bad fur me. I hate to drink alone? An' you know what? Somethin' keeps tellin' me that yuh should go with me tonight. Too late, huh?"

"I guess that's it."

"If—if shange mind, meet me at the ol' Trocadero. My guest, yuh know. We'll make a night of it. . . . Well, gotta get goin' an' get somethin' t'eat. You know, Alfred ol' boy, this is a lousy hotel we live in."

"Think so?"

"I know so! An' want me to tell yuh why? All right. Just had a steak sent up to my room an' couldn't eat it. Never, never was there a worse piece of beef! Tougher 'n hell! Awful!"

"Shouldn't criticise," Alfred humored. "How'd you feel if you died and had to come back to earth as a cow to get all cut up?"

"Hah! That's a good one! Bet you're a lotta fun. Should know yuh better. Bet if I told you that I hate their guts here, you'd say: 'Careful ol' fellow; might come back to earth as vicious ol' tiger. Get it? Hate, tiger, see? What say?"

"Something like that."

"Or—or, 'spose if I was full of love, I'd come back as a dove? What think?"

"I don't know," Alfred tolerated. "They tell me if you're full of love you don't come back at all."

"I'm a cow!" the youth laughed uproariously, reeling over against the elevator. "Oakseydoksey! Bet yuh gonna be sorry yuh didn't come with me," he warned and jiggled the bell with the speed of a vibrator.

A curious sensation of unrest came over Alfred on discovering Anna's telephone busy for the second time.

Having succumbed to the grim satisfaction of retaliation, Anna got Adolph Kaliz on the telephone, surprising that gentleman beyond words. His surprise changed to astonishment when he met the vehemence of her anger.

"I always wanted to tell a man like you just what I thought of him!" she finished her hateful tirade. "And now I have had that extreme pleasure."

She banged the telephone upon its stand, threw herself upon a pillow and wept bitterly. Hardly a full minute had expired before she was again requesting his number.

"Forgive me for everything I said just now," Anna implored. "Don't say anything else. Just that. I humbly ask it."

The penitent voice shocked Adolph Kaliz; and his silence indicated that he had been caught off guard for the first time in his life.

"Please? I want to hear you say it."

"Surely. Of course. Certainly," the banker

managed. "But will you tell me what it's all about?"

"You'll find out," Anna replied contritely; "and you won't be sorry. Thanks so much. I don't know when I've felt so good about anything. Good-by to you."

She hung up gently, quickly regained the desk and left word that under no circumstances was she to be disturbed.

"With the exception of Alfred Garey," she corrected.

Presently she was responding to his call.

"Darling," she rebuked, "what has happened? You said you'd call me immediately."

"Sweet, your line was busy."

"Never mind, darling," she changed the subject. "Tell me what you've been doing? While rummaging in my trunk, I found a comb my mother gave me years ago. I have my hair done up nicely with it. Will you think of me like that? What did you say you had been doing?"

"Writing a note."

"To whom?"

"I thought one necessary in order to prove premeditation."

"My darling! You're always saying: 'That proves something,' aren't you? What does the note contain?"

"It outlines reasons. Understand?"

"No. I want to hear it. Do you feel all right, Alfred?"

"Now that I'm talking to you. When your line was busy for so long, I thought that perhaps your agent might have telephoned."

"Ah, poor Alfred! Is it hope that still lingers? Aren't you ready to give it all up?"

"Yes."

"I too."

"Well, it's twelve o'clock, Ann."

The terse statement cut her like a knife. It answered all her doubts; for in his tone there was that which said: "Are you coming with me?"

"But . . . But . . . " she gasped. "You'll keep talking, won't you? Don't allow one little pause."

"I have the pellets in my hand," he replied in the same courageous tone.

Heat waves smothered her for a moment, then she rallied and struggled for something to say.

"Now . . . If . . . After we take them will you read your note to me?"

"If you want it."

"I do. Of course I do."

"Are you ready, then?"

She breathed heavily and said: "Yes."

"One at a time, sweet. Do not drink any water. Now, the first?"

"Yes."

There was a few seconds pause.

"I did, Alfred."

"So did I. Now another?"

"Yes."

There was a pause.

"Now the third, sweet."

"Yes . . . Alfred, darling, let's read your note before we take the other two. You said there would be no pain?"

"None."

"Anyway, don't stop talking, will you? Continually, I mean, understand? Can you think of lots of things to say?"

"Innumerable."

For breathless moments, she lay listening to lovely things that he had evidently accumulated in the storage of his heart, which turned her Garden of Gethsemane into the Garden of Eden. At length her emotion subsided enough to allow reply in a raspy whisper.

"Darling, never, never have I heard such beautiful and . . . I can't describe my feelings. So I won't try; and you'll understand, darling, just what I mean, won't you my . . . " Stunned by the intoxication of his phrases, she pled: "Oh, but keep on! Keep saying gorgeous things while I can . . . How long *will* I be able to hear you?"

Meanwhile the desk operator advised: "I cannot disturb Miss Hall until morning. She has requested

a 'stop' placed on her telephone. Sorry; any message?"

" . . . and you always seemed so far from me, Anna, so unattainable. If you remember, you ignored me completely when we first met; I mean the very first casual meeting?"

"No. I didn't! You just imagined that . . . Darling, I think I feel sleep creeping over me."

"That's fear, Anna; don't allow it!"

"Well . . . It . . . Will you read your note now?"

"Here's the last part. You'll be interested in that."

"No; I want to hear it all."

"There may be something you'd like to have me delete on the last page, so I'll begin there. Listen, sweet: It is regrettable that I have to beg; for I have always believed in flowers for the living. I now encroach upon my brother-in-law to aid in taking care of my remains in a manner befitting his conscience; for, like Socrates, I do not care about the cloak I am disrobing.

"I refrain from mentioning his name, permitting him a choice in the matter. Should he acquiesce, I implore him to lay Miss Anna Hall by my side. She has had a similar experience to mine; and was the only one who aided me during the darkest state of my existence. It is she who has made the desert of my bloom. But for the fact that I cannot

seem to find a crust of bread in the street of life, I would never think of a surcease; for she is the key to my heart."

"And so this is written with a desire to be judged as having a sane mind when making a decision of departure from a world whose language I cannot learn to speak. Having no one to whom I may say 'good-by,' I merely write it."

"Why, Alfred, you have me to say it to."

"I'm not saying *farewell* to you, sweet."

"Will you read me the first part now?"

"Shall we take the other tablets first?"

"If you say so."

There was a pause.

"Darling, I do so wish you were here. There are just oceans and oceans of things that I want to say. And I can't seem to think fast enough with you so far . . . Still, I won't be able to talk long, will I? How long did you say it would be before . . . "

"Quite a while."

"But don't stop talking, Alfred. If I should, then you break right in. Let's not allow a moment's silence . . . I know what will make a lot of conversation, darling. Let's talk about things that we wanted, how they might have been."

There was a pause.

"I'll start, or you can, darling, and I'll crowd in. Which?"

"Just as you like."

"Rather have me start?"

"Yes."

"I will then . . . I was always crazy to have a home in Beverly Hills. Not like Harold Lock's, of course. His is far too large, wouldn't you say?"

"Pretty big."

"Yes. Eight rooms would suit me. Don't you think that the proper, comfortable size? That includes a guest room. Cute?"

"I think so."

"Oh, and a garden! A very large expanse. You'd have needed a large yard for your police dog, wouldn't you?"

There was a pause.

"Alfred! Talk! Do you suppose that your police dog would have got along all right with my Pekingese puppy?"

There was a pause.

"Alfred!"

"Sure he would. My dog isn't vicious. He's just large is all."

"Let's see, what else? What can you think of? Oh, a car! And darling, from the way I saw you eyeing Harold's, I know that you'd have chosen a roadster, a convertible anyway. Am I right?"

"I guess so."

"I, too! And I'd have had the top down most of the time, driving like mad on long stretches of

country road. It would . . . Darling, I feel a little faint. You talk now."

"I told you not to allow fear, Anna! Listen to me, sweet. It may be quite some time before the pellets take effect, on account of our mental resistance."

"That resistance is terribly strong, isn't it?"

"Terrific!"

"I was going to ask why, but of course I know. It's because we realize how terribly wrong it is to desire an end."

"Yes. Your friend the philosopher called it a selfish excarnation; and I guess that's one of the things it can be called."

"It is, Alfred! There's a horrible feeling creeping over me. It must be born of regret. Do you feel remorse?"

"It's whipping pretty hard."

"Besides thinking myself a coward, everything the Signor ever told me is flashing into my mind in stern rebuke. I wonder why I keep thinking of him? . . . I'm thinking so many things, so fast, that my brain seems on fire. Have you such thoughts?"

"Yes."

"What are they?"

"About the same, I'm sure. We're quitters. The show's going on without us."

There was a pause.

"Alfred! I just can't stand it when you stop talking. Talk about anything. Anything pleasant that will keep our minds off of . . . Talk about the house or garden. . . . Darling, you never told me if you care for children. Did you ever think that you wanted any?"

"Most everyone desires children."

"Boys or girls?"

"I suppose every man wants a son."

"Only one?"

"Well . . . "

"I like girls, too, Alfred. Would you have cared for girls? Don't say so if you wouldn't. I want to remember everything just the way you say it."

"You know I would. Yes, of course. I should say!"

"Two girls, or just one?"

There was a pause.

"Alfred!"

"Two boys and two girls would have made quite a large family, wouldn't it, sweet?"

"I suppose it would. . . . Then one boy and one girl. That must be the ideal. . . . And I'd like to have had the boy like you. Big, brown eyes, with dark hair, ears close to his head, and six feet tall—even taller. . . . Darling, the guest room is already the nursery."

There was a pause.

"Would you have cared to have the girl like me? Don't say so if you wouldn't."

There was a pause.

"What was it, Alfred? Why did you groan? Are you able to speak? Tell me!"

"Yes," a tremulous voice replied. "And that's how it might have been?"

"Would it have mattered so much, darling?"

A low, mumbled jargon vibrated over the wire.

"I can't hear, Alfred! There's a ringing in my ears. This telephone connection must have gone bad. Try again!"

Faintly she heard: "I say I'm like you, sweet. I'm thinking so many things, so fast, that my brain seems on fire. If people who contemplate suicide could only gain my present perspective, they'd never even dream of it. It represents the bankruptcy of the soul."

"It does! I know that now!"

"We should have listened to your friend. I can still hear him saying: 'One cannot stop that which he didn't begin.' "

"And I know that we'll be condemned to something horrible. It's impossible for us to be together. Do you feel the awfulness of that? Talk! I must know what you think."

"Anna, we've been caught in the vortex of our own chaotic reasoning."

"What did you say then?"

"This has gone far enough! This ridiculous experiment has distorted into farce. There is such a thing as an antidote!"

"I heard *antidote*. What, Alfred, what? Talk louder!"

"Black coffee for one thing."

"But we have no money for coffee!"

"Then we'll have to walk and walk for hours in the fresh air!" he shouted, or thought he did.

"I didn't hear anything but mumblings, Alfred! Try again! I can only hear faint laughter. It must be in your court. Can you make out what I say?"

"Hurry!" he thought he commanded. "Hurry down stairs into the fresh air and wait for me. I'll be at your door as soon as I can make it."

"What, Alfred? The wire is buzzing terribly!"

Startled by the sudden noise of silence, Alfred rushed to the tap for a sip of water with which to moisten his parched throat. The refreshing coolness compelled him to drink ravenously and he gulped the contents of the glass. His stomach reacted immediately to a violent chemicalization which whirled his head with vertigo; and a thousand speckled refractions appeared before his eyes, blinding him. In trying to retrace his steps to the telephone, Alfred swerved unsteadily toward the opposite wall and slid to the floor. Mustering all his strength, he crawled to the hall door and ran his hand up to the lock, but his stiffened fingers only

slipped over and around the polished catch, unable to turn it. A futile attempt to attract attention by striking the door with a limp foot made him lose hope. He gasped his despair and sank procumbent on the floor.

"Can't hear!" Anna kept repeating like an SOS. call. Then the paralyzing truth stiffened her faculties. "Oh, my darling!" she muttered. "I understand . . . it's . . . farewell . . . end . . .everything."

The telephone receiver slipped from her weak grasp.

"Get a pass key, whoever you are!" she thought she cried, as footfalls in the hallway terminated at her door.

Faintly she could see the white corner of an envelope being shoved under her door. In trying to move, her body reacted metallically, moving of itself in jerks; an increasing fatigue made it impossible, and she lay still, thinking of all the things she could scream if energy permitted. Then she visioned her whole life doubling back on itself, dried in its own sterile husk. Her blinking eyes tried to readjust the out-of-focus objects about the room; and above an ear-splitting tattoo, she tried to ascertain if she could hear the ticking of the clock. In a few moments, her body twitched, her tired eyes closed, her emotion caused a short-circuit in her heart; and she lay expended, with the beauty

of a great wilted flower in a discolored bowl.

The Greeks had a word for it. The Romans called it *cottabus*. A gin bottle crashed to the cement court of Hotel La Pajaro; and the noise of its loud explosion thundered up the narrow well to meet raucous laughter on the top floor.